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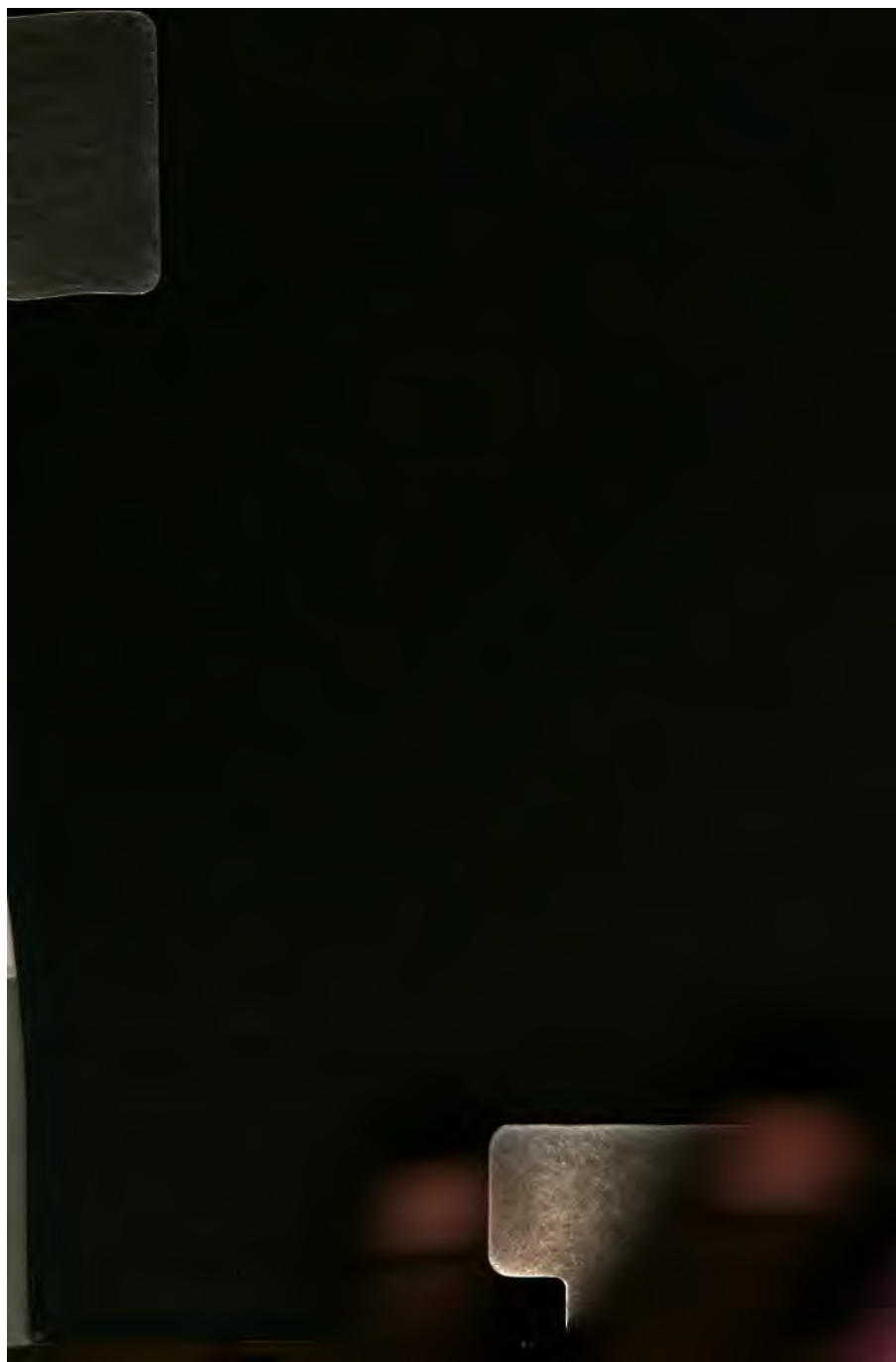
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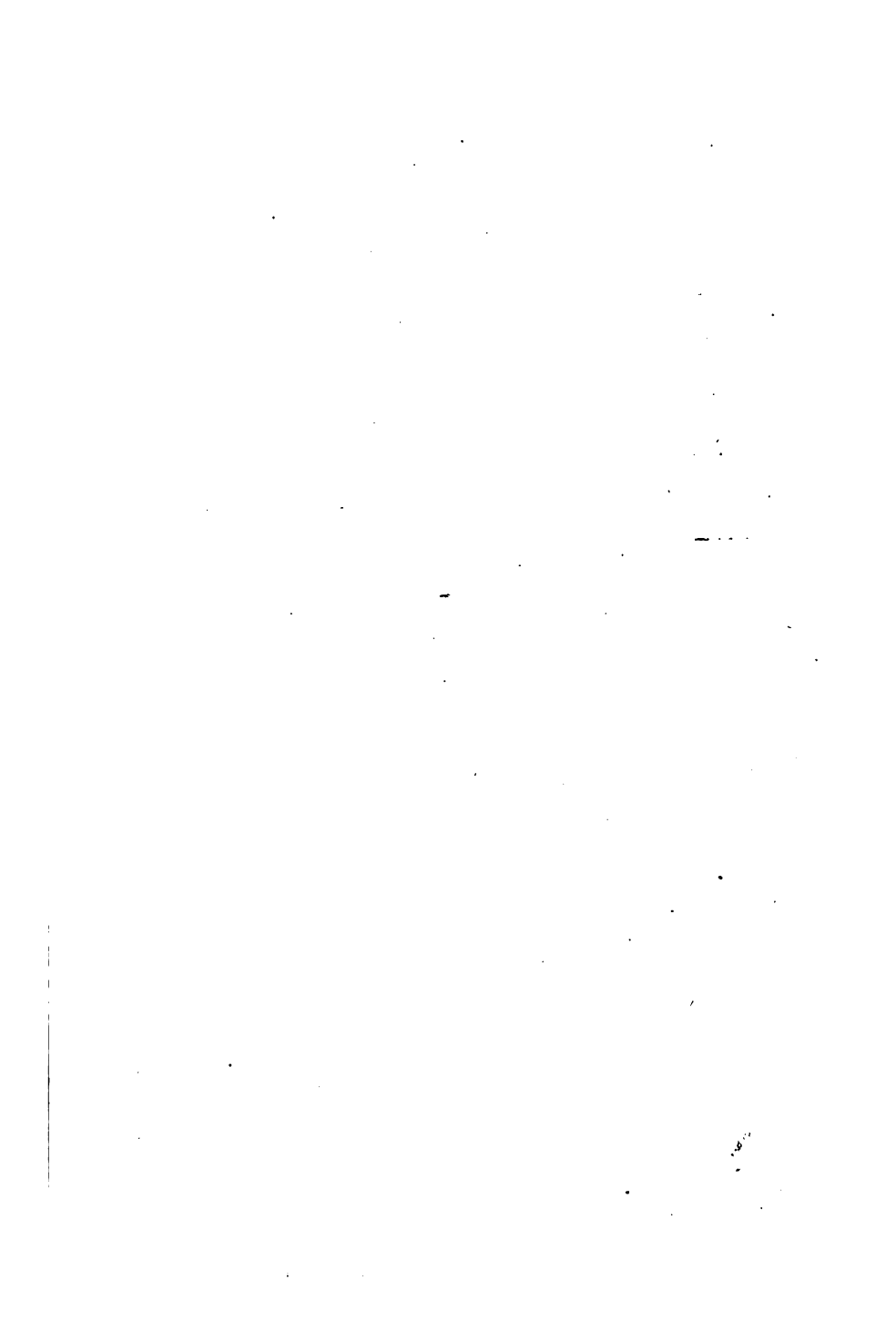
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THE PENALTY PAID

THE PENALTY PAID

A STORY

BY

ALICIA MARY HANCE



London:

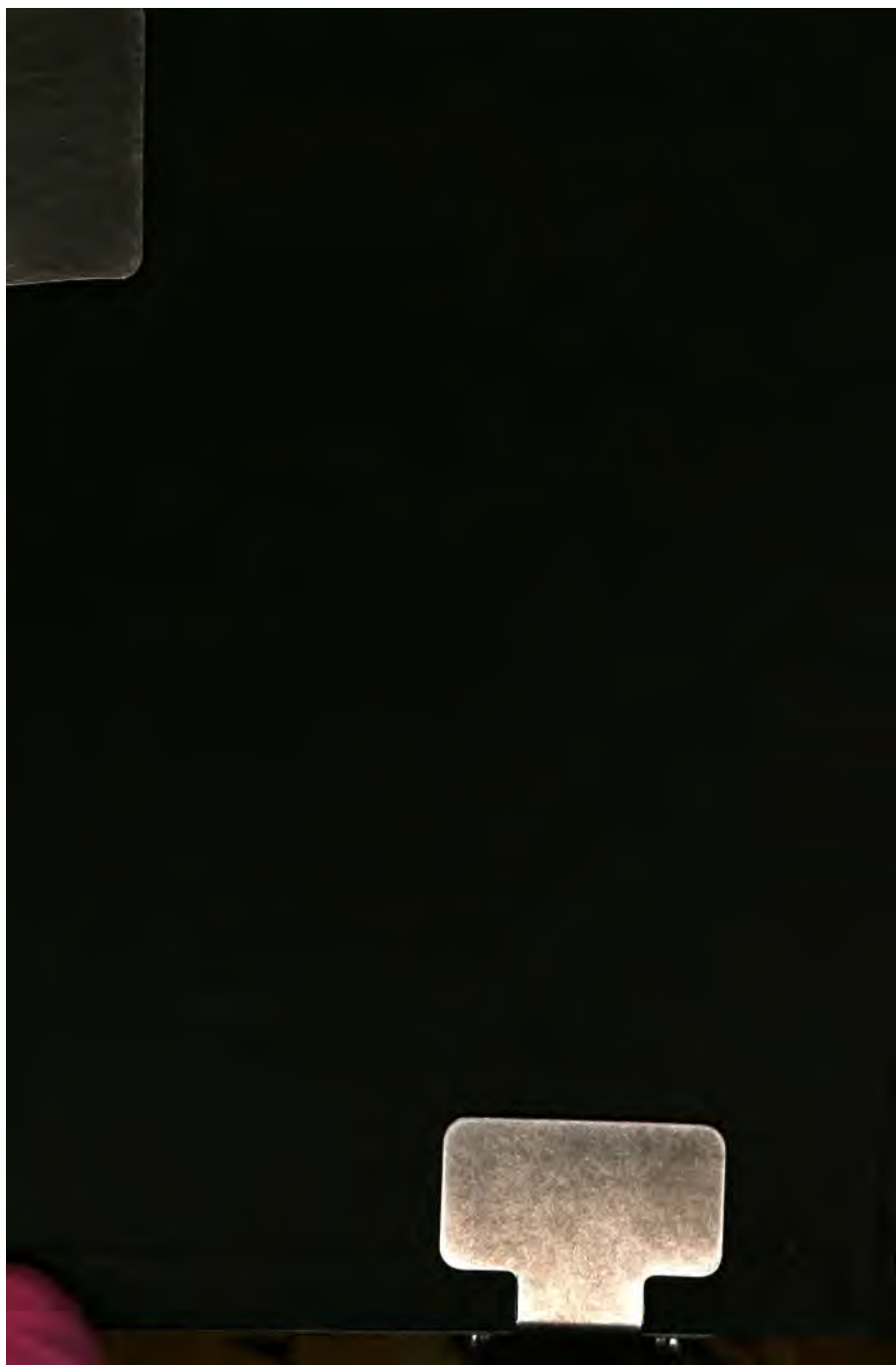
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1884

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the other nestled the moss-grown Vicarage by the side of the ancient Gothic church. Life moved so quietly on, that what in busier places would have been merely ordinary occurrences, in Odstone were extraordinary events.

The death of the old vicar and the appointment of his successor was one of these. But the Reverend Paul Stafford soon became very popular, in spite of the great alterations he made both in the parish and the old fashioned services. His genuine piety, his self-denial, and his unwearied labours in behalf of his flock, justified their regard, even if the improved choir, beautiful flowers, and decorations accounted for the fuller attendance at church, and novelty added enthusiasm for parish work. Some of the older folk may

have shaken their heads at the changed aspect of affairs,—the low open pews, the reredos with its crucifix, the processions, and other innovations,—but they could not close their eyes to the increased care of the sorrowful and poor, the earnest seeking of the sinful, and the general improvement of the parish. And so Paul Stafford was allowed to work in peace after his own lights.

Soon after the vicar had settled to his new duties the Squire of Odstone, who had been travelling abroad with his family for some years, returned to the old Hall, and it became a topic of much interest to the female portion of the community, who Renault Tremleston, the heir, would marry. It was generally supposed, and not altogether without reason, that pretty

fair-haired Amy Spenlow, niece to the Squire, was the destined bride. The Squire did all he could to encourage the idea. It had been necessity and not choice that had made him desert the home of his forefathers so long, (for he hated living anywhere but at Odstone) and there were heavy claims against the old estate which Amy's share in old Sir John Spenlow's fortune could satisfy. Lady Spenlow, who had gone an almost penniless bride from the Hall to the wealthy city knight, was anxious to keep the family acres together by such means. Amy wished it, for she loved her tall, dark, handsome cousin with all the force of her gentle nature. But did Renault, named after the French grandmother whose extravagance first began the Tremleston

embarrassments, wish it? All had thought and hoped so. Arrangements for the marriage were actually being mooted, when Renault seemed suddenly to take a dislike to the whole affair. He had never formally proposed to his cousin, and now without word or warning he announced one day that he had no present intention of getting married.

The Squire and his wife were thunder-struck at this unexpected blow, but by the advice of the vicar they resolved to let him alone for awhile.

Renault's was a peculiar and melancholy disposition, which displayed itself in a gloomy reserve that all the affection his parents and sisters felt for him, and the deference they paid to his wishes could not dispel. So both his father

and mother were pleased when he formed a sudden but warm friendship with the vicar, who gratefully responded to the advances of a young and well-educated man—a rare being in Odstone.

Renault entered with considerable zest into the church services. His well trained baritone voice was of the utmost use in a choir composed chiefly of men and boys imperfectly acquainted with music, and liable to the not uncommon trick of unexpectedly breaking down unless supported by some thorough vocalist. One Sunday morning this actually happened. Renault frowned in annoyance when the tune was taken up by a clear soprano voice rallying the weak and faltering boys. Glancing round the church he saw standing near the

chancel gates a lady whose residence at Odstone had been a fruitless but intense source of interest to all the inhabitants. It was from this time that Renault began to evince repugnance to his proposed marriage with Amy Spenlow.

* * * * *

About two hundred yards from the church gates stood a cottage enclosed within a small garden closely planted by trees and shrubs which nearly hid the house from sight. Two years before my story commences it had become vacant, but though duly advertised, it was so quiet and retired that it remained empty for six months, when just as the flowers were coming into bloom in the pretty garden, and the trees were luxuriant in

the June foliage, a gentleman came down to Odstone, looked over the house, asked minute questions of the old parish clerk, who showed him the property, about the neighbourhood and its inhabitants, as it was required for a lady needing rest and extreme quiet.

‘Which she’d have, sir,’ said the worthy clerk as he dangled the keys to and fro, ‘and I’m sure the ladies round about will be happy to keep her company when she feels lonesome like.’

‘She will not need them, would not have them,’ replied the gentleman emphatically, ‘the lady will bring her own servant who attends to all her wants, and will require neither friend nor help; if she thought there was the least likelihood of intrusion from anyone she would not

come, her only desire is to be quiet and undisturbed.'

'To be sure, sir, to be sure,' said the somewhat startled clerk, 'and when may we expect Mrs ——? I did not catch her name, sir.'

'Oh, you need not trouble about that. I will complete with Mr Gray all necessary details, and then I can have the keys, and the lady will come when she likes.'

With this, off drove the London lawyer to the neighbouring town to take the cottage from the solicitor of the property, giving him no particulars about his client, except that she was in delicate health, disliked business, and left everything to her solicitors, Messrs Summerson and Baines of Lincoln's Inn Fields, London,

who would arrange all demands. The mention of the firm was sufficient. Mr Gray knew there was not much chance of letting the place so Mr Summerson concluded the matter, taking the cottage in his own name. The keys were delivered to him, and he returned to London.

One morning smoke was observed issuing from the chimneys of the cottage, and later on a respectable elderly woman was seen in the village making some purchases. She spoke civilly to all with whom she came in contact, but repelled all questions in a distant manner, and when it was necessary for a name to be given, she gave her own — Mrs Susan Turner. She managed all her mistress' affairs. No one was ever admitted within

the precincts of Church Cottage, with the exception of a little dumb boy who helped to tidy the garden, and performed a few extra tasks that the old servant found too much for her; but even he never caught a glimpse of the lady of the house. Susan Turner occasionally went over to Oldtown, and during her absence it was useless to ring the house bell—no notice was ever taken of it, nor was the mysterious inmate (for so the Odstonians designated her) ever seen to pass her gate, except to attend the numerous services of the church. These she never missed. As the bell commenced, a slight elegant woman would emerge from the garden and walk swiftly into the sacred building and occupy a seat which commanded a view of the altar, and kneeling there rarely raised her head

except it was to gaze yearningly, beseechingly, on the Divine Figure which looked down upon her from the cross with Its pitying eyes. .

CHAPTER II

AT first the strange lady was closely veiled ; but one very hot day the veil was thrown back, and discovered a face so sad, so sweet, with such a depth of sorrow in the dark grey eyes that deepened the interest already felt in her. No one ever heard her voice, except when its beautiful tones rang out in the church, or when of a summer's evening she might be heard practising the chants and hymns in her own drawing-room. In deeds of charity

she seemed bountiful. None who applied for help at her doors were ever turned away by Susan Turner. Large parcels of clothing and money for the poor were placed at the vicar's disposal, but the gifts were never accompanied by word or message of any kind, and when he presented himself at Church Cottage in his character of clergyman of the parish, he found it as impossible to gain admittance as ever did any gossip who called with offers of companionship. There was no excuse made. Susan Turner was civil, but always met each visitor with the same answer: 'My mistress begs to be excused,' which was tempered only to Mr Stafford by the addition of 'My mistress bids me say, sir, if ever she needs assistance she will apply to you.'

With this the clergyman was fain to be content. He felt it was best to let matters shape themselves, and to respect a silence for which there must be some strong reason, whether good or bad. So when Renault Tremleston, who undisguisedly expressed his admiration for the lovely stranger, proposed to Mr Stafford that he should invite her to take some of the anthem solos, the vicar exclaimed in astonishment, 'A woman in an Anglican choir! What can you be thinking of?' Renault was equal to the occasion and replied, 'Oh! I have considered all that; have a portion near the organ railed and curtained off; get her to wear a sister's dress and sit behind, there would be no scandal in that.'

'My dear fellow,' laughed his friend,

'have you thought of the storm that would inevitably break over our devoted heads at the bare mention of such an arrangement. Besides,' he added more gravely, 'were your plan feasible, which it is not, how could I propose to introduce a lady, were it only at a concert or a reading, who shrouds herself in secresy, shrinking from the notice of her neighbours who know nothing of her; speaking in all charity, it would be both unwise and unsafe.'

'Sorrow and trouble,' returned Renault warmly, 'may have touched her, but sin or shame never.'

'I hope not; meanwhile you must allow that it is not likely that a person, who will not admit even the visits of her parish priest would consent to sing in public.'

This was unanswerable, but Renault next induced his mother, who could refuse him nothing, to make some advances. She sighed as she saw how faint were growing Amy's chances, and how Renault was giving himself up to a dream so shadowy and dangerous. But she promised, if an opportunity arose, to gain an admittance at Church Cottage. So when in November she heard that a doctor had been called in to prescribe for the recluse, she tried to redeem her word by stopping Susan Turner, the first time she met her, to ask how her mistress was. The answer was, that the lady only required care after a bad cold, and when the kind questioner offered to come and visit the patient, Susan replied in a distressed tone, 'My mistress could

not see you, thank you all the same, ma'am, indeed she could not, a stranger would do her so much harm.'

'Is she so nervous?' asked Mrs Tremleston surprised.

'She's all that's sweet and dear to me, ma'am; I nursed her as a baby, have loved her in her joy and sorrow, and shall love her to the end,' and as if fearful she had said too much, with this ambiguous answer the woman dropped a hurried curtsey and entered her own gate.

And even Renault felt that good taste and feeling forbade any further advance to one who withdrew herself so determinedly from the outer world, and who knelt Sunday after Sunday in the same church with him apparently as

unconscious of his admiring gaze as she was of all else around her.

* * * * *

Christmas was at hand. Amy and her mother were staying at the Hall. Her guardian, Harvey Burnside, had also come down, ostensibly to conclude, if possible, the arrangements for her wedding. He had been intimate with the Squire's family for years and was fully aware how important the marriage was for all their interests, so though he had made other arrangements for spending his Christmas, an urgent and private note from Mrs Tremleston relating the great change in Renault and the evident cause, made him repair to Odstone without delay. He was a barrister, keen and clever, mixed in good society, and specially prided

himself on the way he related a story, never missing an opportunity of causing a sensation, however it affected his hearers or the subject of his narrative.

It was the first time he had visited the Hall since the Squire's return, and arriving late one Saturday evening, was present next day in the Hall pew at morning service in the old church. The pew was on the right of the chancel, Renault singing in the choir on the left, and the inmates of Church Cottage occupying a seat near the chancel gates.

It was the Sunday before the Festival. Harvey Burnside's attention was at first chiefly engrossed by the alterations in the church and service, when it was arrested in the middle of the Psalms, by the choir boys missing the chant, and a clear sweet

feminine voice taking up the air, and rallying the failing notes. Burnside uttered an exclamation, and leaned forward towards where the unknown lady sat. She turned her head and their eyes met, she grew paler than ever and dropped into her seat as if struck by a sudden blow. The choristers, recovered from their hesitation, sang on, but the voice that had so often helped and sustained them was silenced. After a short interval its owner appeared to regain calmness and to mechanically follow the forms of the service, but the sweet quiet expression her countenance had hitherto worn was fled, and replaced by a look of terror and despair.

Burnside thought the sermon the longest he had ever listened to, but

when it was over he lingered in his place until he saw the unknown rise, when he walked into the porch and waited; she saw him, hesitated, drew herself up with a visible effort, and passing him acknowledged his salutation, as he raised his hat to her with an easy grace, and walked rapidly home. After greeting his acquaintance Burnside walked silently back to the Hall by Mrs Tremleston's side, noting Renault's uneasiness at his recognition of the stranger. The Squire at luncheon, however, opened the matter by crying out: 'Why, Burnside, you are the very man Odstone has been wanting for the last eighteen months. Church Cottage, pretty little place, you remember, beyond the church, has been tenanted by a lady for that

time, who lives in the most mysterious seclusion, successfully baffling all our curiosity, and now you come down and appear to be on speaking terms with her. Pray enlighten us.'

'Do you mean to say you know nothing about her?'

'Not even her name,' replied Mrs Tremleston. 'About a year and a half ago Church Cottage was taken by a London solicitor; soon after the lady in question attended by one old servant arrived, and there she has lived doing many an act of charity and being a constant attendant at church, but she has never spoken to a soul in Odstone, nor has any one ever been admitted inside her gates.'

'And what construction is put on this?'

‘The favourite one is, that she is hiding from a cruel husband; another that she is an inconsolable widow, and others, I daresay as well founded; but I am glad you have come,’ [thinking of René who sat gloomily silent, but with every sense alert to learn something], ‘as I should like to know who she really is, and so silence all conjectures about her.’

‘If you will allow me,’ was the reply, ‘I will tell you all I am acquainted with after dinner this evening. It is a long story of which I know all the details, but it is as well [staring coolly at Renault, who stared defiantly back at him] that you should be made aware of it.’

With these words Burnside rose, left the room, and shortly after the house.

Renault followed, and with a jealous

pang watched him go up to the gate of Church Cottage and ring there three or four times. The bell was unanswered, and Burnside looked searchingly up at the windows. After a brief delay he walked slowly back to the Hall, proceeded to the library, took down a volume of the *Times* dated some two years back, which he attentively perused.

CHAPTER III

DINNER was just over, the servants had left the room leaving the dessert upon the table. Comfort reigned supreme; it was reflected in the ruddy blaze of the log fire, it shone in the lights of the wax candles, and gleamed from the glittering glass and plate.

Harvey Burnside had been somewhat silent during dinner and now sat thoughtfully sipping his wine, while Renault from his corner on the opposite side of the table

awaited with a sickening dread (which did not overcome his fierce longing to hear) what Burnside had to say. Amy Spenlow sat unheeded by his side, and he started when he heard the Squire say:

‘Now, Burnside, for your promised story.’

‘It is a long and sad one, Squire, and if I tell it, I must enter into many a painful detail. Do you wish the girls to hear it? Mind there is nothing in it but what perhaps it is as well that even such good girls as these should know. But that is for your decision; if the story is told, it must be told thoroughly and in public,’ and Burnside looked at René. The Squire followed Burnside’s glance and briefly said, ‘Tell it.’

‘Yes, tell it Mr Burnside,’ interposed

Lillian Tremleston, 'let us know who she was, what she did, and where you saw her last.'

Harvey Burnside looked at the pretty eager girl anxious to hear what had been so nearly forbidden her, and then, turning towards Renault, on whom, though he never addressed him, he kept his eyes while he told his story, answered:

'When I last saw Katherine Mowbray she was being tried for her life.'

He meant to astonish them and he did. Renault grasped the edge of the table as the room seemed to swim before his eyes, his parents, utterly shocked at such an announcement as they were, looked to see what effect it would have on him, and the rest of the party sat awestruck waiting to hear what came next.

Harvey continued :

‘ When I first saw Katherine Mowbray, some six years ago, she was about nineteen years of age. You, who see her now and think her fair to look upon, can scarcely imagine the change that trouble and trial has wrought in her. It was no pale sad-faced woman that I knew, but a bright happy girl, the only child of an indulgent father. During his life, she never felt the loss of the mother who died at her birth, from which period joy and beauty surrounded her, who had never, when I first knew her, felt a sorrow. I think I can see her now as I saw her at a dance the first evening I ever met her, so graceful and gay, so great a favourite, and yet so generous and kind.

She had, besides, a splendid voice, it was that, indeed, by which I principally recognised her to-day, and she readily sang when she was asked.

‘I was introduced to, and danced with. her, but though she was very charming and gracious, I did not get another opportunity of engaging her, and had to content myself with lesser stars. Later in the evening while I was talking to her father, (a man of considerable ability and literary fame), I glanced towards the door, and I saw a tall handsome man whispering to and smiling on Kate. She seemed flushed and pleased, and I saw her afterwards dancing again and again with Raymond Yorke. I knew him slightly as a man notoriously unscrupulous in his dealings

with women. It was rumoured that he had gained his wife at the expense of losing his most intimate friend, and yet he slighted her and was never seen in her company. Altogether I should have been sorry to have had him the associate of any girl I felt an interest in. On the other hand, he was a fascinating companion, and I was hardly surprised to see Kate introduce him to her father, who, after a little conversation, asked him to visit them.

‘Yorke wanted no second invitation; he was struggling into a position in which Mowbray could be, he knew, of great service to him. Moreover there was Kate: attraction great enough if there had been no other inducement. Not that I believe he had any base design upon her then.

‘Mowbray kept up an elegant establishment. Old Susan Turner, who had nursed Kate as a baby, superintended all the arrangements, and Kate made a charming hostess. Yorke soon became the friend of the family; the old man liked him. Simple-minded and honourable himself, he suspected no danger in the intimacy in a married man amusing and petting his little daughter.

‘The last cheerful evening that Kate was ever to spend—the last time I saw her happy, honoured, and beloved—she was present at a small dance to which she and her father had been invited. He had fully intended to have accompanied her, but just before starting he told Kate that he did not feel well enough to go with her, and, if she did not mind, would stay

at home. Kate was anxious to remain with him, but he would not hear of it and dismissed her with a smile and a kiss, promising to take every care of himself.

‘She had no foreshadowing of the evil to come, and laughed and danced to her heart’s content, little thinking, poor child, it was the last time her little feet would move to and fro so merrily over the floor. Yorke was present at the party and took her home. As she ran up the steps, Susan opened the door with an anxious face, and he followed her in.

“‘My dear,” said the nurse, “go to your papa; he wants you sadly; he is in the study.”

‘A sudden pain seized Kate’s heart as she ran quickly into the room where her father sat surrounded with his papers.

He was not reading them ; but was leaning back in his chair with grey shadows on his countenance that warned Yorke that the dread messenger was coming close. Thoughtful and kind as he had ever been to the Mowbrays, he left to fetch the nearest doctor.

“ Papa ! papa ! ” cried Kate as she fell on her knees beside his chair and looked up into his face with a fear she had never felt before. For a moment he regarded her vacantly, and mournfully said, “ Where have you been ; I have wanted you so ; ” and then, before she could reply, he clasped her in his arms and murmured over her bright hair, “ My little Kitty ! my poor, poor child, how shall I tell you ? ”

‘ She raised her head as he kissed her, with a tender smile, but a sudden pain

distorted his face and convulsed his whole frame.

‘Yorke at that moment returned with the doctor who took the brandy Susan brought and administered a dose to the sufferer,—his features gradually regained their expression, his limbs relaxed, and he appeared coming back to consciousness. As the doctor watched him returning to life, he whispered to the nurse: “Why did you not send for me before? How long has he been ill?”

“He has been complaining of darting pains in the heart all the evening, sir, but made my young lady go out to-night, and would neither have anything, nor let me send for anyone. He has been upset ever since a letter came this afternoon.”

““You should have sent,” replied the surgeon gravely, as he stooped over the patient, who, quite sensible and free from pain, was softly caressing Kate. “Will you have a bed made up for you here, sir, it would be better not to go upstairs to-night?”

““Whatever you wish or think best,” replied poor Mowbray, wearily, “leave me my child; she is all I want!”

‘Kate nestled closer to him, and he bent over her, and so both remained, while the servants made the necessary preparations, Yorke and the doctor standing aside watching father and daughter. At the expiration of half-an-hour, the doctor approached his patient and offered to assist him to his couch. Yorke bent down too. The old man—he had grown

so old in the last few hours—looked up at him, and, laying his hand on Kate's head, he said, "You will take care of her."

'As he spoke another convulsion seized him. They hastened with restoratives, but they were unavailing. Mowbray had run his race, and Kate was alone in the world.

CHAPTER IV

‘WHAT need have I to dwell on such a scene? It was not only Katherine Mowbray’s first sorrow, but the commencement to her of many another grief.

‘On searching poor Mowbray’s papers it appeared that the letter which had arrived the afternoon preceding his decease announced the failure of an enterprise in which not only most of his fortune was embarked, but rendered him liable for a large sum. This dreadful news, perilling

not only the comforts of his own old age but Kate's future, quite overwhelmed poor Mowbray. He had known for some time that his heart was diseased, and at times had suffered great pain; but he had hidden it from Kate, reluctant to give her a moment's anxiety.

‘Yet, when the blow came, it seemed to fall all the harder; and when Kate awoke from her first stupor of grief, it was to find herself destitute, and, as usual in such cases, deserted by all the acquaintances who had once been so glad to know her.

‘Yorke alone stood her firm and faithful friend; and, I am sure, his services to her then were actuated by nothing but the purest kindness. He arranged everything, saw everybody, and even managed, out of the wreck, to save a few

pounds for Kate to begin the world with.

‘Aroused by the necessities of her position, Katherine Mowbray prepared to meet her troubles bravely. Her hardest task and, what afterwards turned out to be, her greatest misfortune was parting . with poor old Susan. It was like wrenching away the last link of her past; and when the old woman begged her to let her stay with her for nothing, it was with difficulty Kate forced back the blinding tears as she said, “No, dear, no; I must manage alone, dearly as I should like to keep you; but, if ever I can do so, I promise to send for you.” And with this Susan was obliged to be content; and Kate lost her most faithful friend and protector.

‘So Kate went into a little lodging, and tried (only those who have experienced such a lot as hers can know how hard she tried) to get employment. Nothing that offered, however humble, did she disdain; but how difficult she found it to procure food and shelter only those who have struggled and suffered like her can tell. Often and often poor Kate crept supperless to bed, to wake the next morning with no prospect of breakfast.

‘The loneliness too, the entire change from all she had been used to in her tenderly nurtured youth, crushed and depressed her. Her general attractiveness had drawn to her many admirers, whom, in her happy days, she had laughed at, and, as she playfully said, “Kept in their proper places,” but now she bitterly

felt the loss of friends and all that had made life pleasant to her.

‘What wonder then that Kate turned to the only man who stood by and comforted her! What wonder then that the care of such a being made at last too deep an impression upon such a heart as Raymond Yorke’s; and that one day he awoke to the knowledge that he passionately loved a woman whom he was bound by all claims of honour and gratitude to protect from the love he could feel or bestow!

‘At first he shrank with horror from what even he deemed almost a profanation, but he had never been a man to sacrifice himself, or spare a woman. And Kate’s helplessness, her father’s goodness to him, his dying words, were insufficient to hold

him back. Poor girl! she little knew, when she inveighed so vehemently against her whilome friends that her bitterest enemy was really he who professed to be her closest ally, and when at last he gradually declared his passion to her, she recoiled from him, as if he had struck her a blow.

‘But Raymond Yorke was no novice in the art of bending a woman to his will, and though Kate proved hard to win, opposition only increased his efforts to subdue her. He begged and coaxed her by turns, and when all seemed useless, and he left her (seemingly offended) with hard words (the first unkind ones he had ever addressed to her) the poor child felt as if she were indeed alone. Do not judge her harshly, if at the grief caused

by the desertion of her last friend, she discovered in her desolation how dependant she had become on him, and in missing his fondness and care the secret of her heart was revealed to her, and she knew she loved him back with all the strength of her soul. So when Yorke re-appeared after an absence of a few weeks (an absence not longer to him than to Kate) his task was not very difficult, and Kate, sweet pure Katherine Mowbray, who had been so gentle and so good in prosperity, and had borne herself so bravely and nobly in adversity, parted with her last, her best possession, her own true self.'

As Harvey Burnside paused at this part of his story, he glanced at Renault Tremleston to see the effect it had had

upon him, and he was not altogether dissatisfied at the result. The realisation of the sickening dread, that René had experienced, had bowed his head in bitter disappointment and anguish. Harvey drank off a glass of wine and continued:

‘I am coming now to the awful part of my story. For a few months Katherine Mowbray lived in a fool’s paradise. To be cared for and petted, as Yorke in the first flush of success cared for and petted her, was a dream of too great happiness after her trials and hardships, and though in the solitude of the midnight hours the consciousness of the price she had paid for it all came across her, she drove away the thought of her father’s memory and her guileless girlhood, and only dared to live in the present without thought of the future.

CHAPTER V

‘For a few months Yorke was all she could desire and many were the pleasures they enjoyed together, and she little cared, if when she happened to encounter some of her former acquaintances, they withheld the slightest recognition of her as they glanced at the man walking by her side. At first he was as reckless as she, and scoffed at the world’s emptiness and hypocrisy, as he marked the colour

rising on her delicate cheek, when she was cut dead.

‘Yes, at first, but later on he began to find out that his close intimacy with a young and friendless girl, however carefully he had intended to keep it from his own circle, was a matter of notoriety and comment even there. Rumour of it had reached the ears of his wife, which threatened to widen the breach his neglect had created between them.

‘This was a serious state of things for Yorke whose present income was solely derived from his wife’s fortune, and whose future prospects depended upon her expectations from an elderly aunt, whose straightlaced views would never have recovered from the shock of hearing of his depravity. Selfish as he had always been,

now that the first glamour of his fancy for Miss Mowbray had passed away, he began seriously to consider his position and soon formed a deliberate intention of bringing about, by any means which might come to his hand, a marriage between her and some man, he cared not who. This being his state of mind, Kate naturally found his manner altering towards her. His visits became shorter and fewer, and when he did come, instead of praises and caresses bestowed on her, other women were extolled to her depreciation.

‘Kate had a spirit, and her temper tried and not improved by the strain it had undergone, shewed unmistakeably that she would not easily submit to a change. She did her best to retain her hold upon her lover ; but when a man is wearied of a

woman, of what avail are tears, reproaches, entreaties, or affection! Kate tried all, with the usual result of hearing bitter truths and impatient words that half-maddened her, while her heart was nearly broken. She was unwillingly forced to recognise that love once dead can never be revived, and when Yorke finally with cool heartlessness proposed getting her a husband, she passionately resented the insult as she cried, "Never! Never!! There is no reason because you have cheated me, that I should cheat another man to relieve you of your villany."

'Yorke laughed at what he termed her heroics. Her speech only determined him the more in his purpose, and she little knew how soon she would be tempted.

'For some weeks afterwards Kate saw

no more of Yorke, but was left to reap alone the reward of her sin and folly. In her solitude broken only by the weary daily search for work, the unfailing punishment began and tortured her with visions of lost happiness, lost peace, lost hope. The remembrance of her father, his grief and disappointment if he could know how low she had fallen, the wounded pride that she should have been a mere plaything to be tossed aside when done with; the shame, the bitter agony when she thought of her lost purity and aspirations, nearly drove her to despair; and she daily drooped and faded away

‘At last, one sultry evening, as she was toiling home after an unavailing application for employment, she came suddenly upon Yorke walking with a

friend. He stopped and spoke kindly to her, and her face lighted up with pleasure at sight of her *ci-devant* lover. Accordingly hearing Allen Hamilton's exclamation at her beauty, he determined to seize the opportunity and turn it to account. He introduced his friend to her, and rejoiced her heart by promising to come and see her.

‘When she passed on, Allen Hamilton broke out into expressions of her loveliness and grace; and seeing him so thoroughly taken, Yorke told him about her sad position, and, marking his growing interest, dwelt on her bereavement and sorrow, regularly enlisted his sympathies on her behalf, and finally offered to take him to see her.

‘Allen Hamilton had only just returned

from Australia, and, finding himself alone in London, was pleased to meet Yorke, whom he had known some years previously. Of an ardent and generous disposition, he was deeply touched by so sad a tale; and when Yorke, after praising Kate up to the skies as a paragon of virtue, suggested that he might assist her materially if he would go with him to make her further acquaintance, Hamilton was only too pleased to know more of a woman with whom he had really fallen in love at first sight.

‘Kate was slightly disappointed, two evenings afterwards, to see her quondam lover appear accompanied by his friend; but, thankful for small mercies, she received her guests with a brightness and vivacity which quite entranced Allen

Hamilton. And she, won by his respectful cordiality soon unfolded to him all her plans and endeavours to obtain employment, and thankfully accepted his offer of help with the few friends he possessed. He was as good as his word, and assisted her to some extent. Busy with commissions of work, they often met. The more Hamilton knew of her, the more he liked her; and one evening, when she was, with tearful eyes, expressing her gratitude to him, he declared his love and earnestly begged her to be his wife.

‘The temptation was very great for Kate. She could not love him as she had, and, in spite of all, still did love Raymond Yorke; but her better reason told her that the man standing before

her, holding her hands in his, was warm and true, and far superior to her heartless betrayer. She was sick of loneliness and privation; she was offered a loving husband and a good home, both of which she could secure by reconciling her conscience to conceal her sin from him.

‘But it was only for a moment she wavered. She had sinned deeply; but she had not lost her sense of what was right; and her whole soul revolted from the thought of deceiving the generous hearted man who placed his honour in her keeping. It was with then a fresher feeling of desolation that she withdrew her hands from his, and, sinking into a chair, told him that it could never, never be as he wished.

“‘But why not?’ he urged, “I do not

expect you to love me as I do you, but I can give you a home which I will strive to make a happy one, an adoring husband, and a warm welcome from those friends I possess."

'She looked up, her sweet face bathed in tears, but shook her head; her trembling lips could not frame a syllable. Seeing her so distressed—but without an inkling of the truth—he bent down and asked her if she would prefer waiting till the next evening to give him her final reply; and when she made a motion of assent, Hamilton went away somewhat puzzled but not downcast, leaving Kate to reflect on what might have been had she only resisted temptation.

'She spent a painful night. The battle was fierce and strong, but when morning

broke right had triumphed, and she determined, however it might cause him to shrink from her, to tell Allen Hamilton the truth and leave the future in his hands.

CHAPTER VI

‘IN the evening Hamilton came and was shown into Kate’s sitting-room. This was on the first floor at the back of the house and opened upon a balcony overlooking a small garden and surrounded by a low stone coping a few inches in height, on which were placed several of her favourite flowers. When Hamilton entered, he found her seated on this balcony and he joined her there. Traces of tears and the mental struggle she had gone through

were visible on her mobile countenance. Uneasy and grieved at her sad demeanour, which he feared was a bad omen, Hamilton concealed his anxiety and began speaking of topics he thought likely to interest and amuse her, before approaching the subject nearest his heart. Seeing at last that Kate could not give her attention to the conversation intended to divert her mind, after a somewhat lengthy pause (during which he watched her, as with downcast eyes she sat, her hand grasping a locket which contained Yorke's portrait and had been his gift in earlier days, suspended round her throat) he broke silence with:

“Dear Kate, I hope you have reconsidered your decision of last evening. Wont you make me happy?”

“Oh, if I could,” she passionately

answered, "but I cannot. If you did but truly know me, know the wicked miserable creature that I really am, you would so far from wishing to make me your wife, shun such a guilty being."

"You magnify any little shortcomings such as every mortal is liable to, dear," he replied encouragingly, "I am ready to take you faults and all."

"But not with such faults and wickedness as mine," and slipping on her knees and hiding her face, she confessed her sin, and so confessing spoke all her future happiness away.

'Hamilton sat confounded. Kate's whole manner had been so opposite to any like supposition, and Yorke's high encomiums on her virtues had induced him to consider her such a paragon of

female excellence that the revelation she made left him powerless even to speak. After a moment's silence he rose and walked sorrowfully out of the room, and made his way into the street. As he turned from the door he found himself face to face with Yorke, who by a strange coincidence happened to be passing the house. Struck by the painful and shocked expression in Hamilton's face, he asked,

“Whatever is the matter, man? Is Kate unkind?”

“Don't ask me Yorke, I have had a terrible blow.”

Yorke remembered Kate's threat, and desirous of learning if she had compromised him, persisted:

“Is it about her?”

‘Surprised at his eager manner, but determined not to betray Kate’s confidence, Hamilton replied somewhat stiffly,

“You press me Yorke, but perhaps I ought to tell you, who introduced me to her, that I have proposed to Miss Mowbray and have been refused.”

‘Yorke turned white with rage to find his cherished scheme for getting rid of Kate defeated just as it had been on the point of being accomplished. He felt very anxious on this subject, for even apart from the consideration that her marriage would have disarmed the suspicions of his wife, he could not, though his affection for her had ceased, divest himself of all responsibility on her account, and above all the uneasy thought that she might yet become

very troublesome to him, and with the same odd expression he hastily said, "Oh, Hamilton you are too easily disconcerted. You don't mind my seeing Kate and talking her into a reasonable frame of mind; it is not like her to be whimsical or coquettish."

"Do not interfere on my behalf I beg, Yorke. Disappointed as I am, I yet respect Miss Mowbray's motives."

"As you will," replied the other coldly as he went his way; but with no intention of keeping his word, he watched Hamilton out of sight and then immediately repaired to Kate's abode to satisfy himself whether she had betrayed him, and if not, to make her call her suitor back. He had no patience with her ideas of honour. His

loose code of morals recognised no harm in cheating a woman, and he saw no reason why, when convenient, she on her side should not deceive a man. He found Kate kneeling where Hamilton had left her; her attitude and extreme dejection confirmed his fears, and going up to her he shook her roughly by the shoulder, saying :

“Have you been such a fool, such a weak, sentimental idiot as to tell Allen Hamilton of the intimacy between us?” She sprang to her feet and confronted him so suddenly that he took a step on to the balcony.

“I was bound to tell him,” she cried; “I have been a fool indeed, but of your making !”

“You were ready enough,” he sneered ;

“and now you have lost your last chance of respectability in trying to pass off your mock honour on one man when you had parted with the reality to another.”

‘The false, cruel taunt was too much for Kate Mowbray’s temper, never kept under much control ; and, overcome with passion, she gasped out, “ You cowardly liar ! ”

““ At anyrate,” he returned, “ you have seen your last of me. I am sick of your airs and stupidity. Before I go, I will thank you to give me back that locket you are wearing ; my wife will scarcely care for my likeness to be worn by another woman.”

‘Transported with rage at this last insult, Kate tore off the portrait and flung it at Yorke. It struck him on the temple. Half-blinded and stunned by the

blow, he never noticed how near he was to the unprotected edge of the balcony. He stumbled, and was precipitated on to the stones beneath.

‘Kate shrieked as she saw him fall, and the landlady and her servant, who had been listening on the stairs with greedy ears to the quarrel, (in his haste Yorke had never closed the door) ran in and saw Kate point horror-stricken to the open window. Unable to understand what had happened the women went out on the balcony and saw Yorke lying motionless below. By this time Kate had rushed downstairs to him and the landlady followed to render what aid she could to the injured man, at the sametime bidding the girl to “fetch a doctor and then seek Mr Hamilton.”

CHAPTER VII

‘WHEN Hamilton parted from Yorke he walked to the corner of the street where a crowd had collected, and watched with eyes that did not see the antics of a street acrobat. As he stood there buried in bitter thought his mind reverted to his recent encounter with Yorke and his odd manner. For the first time it flashed across him that Kate did not seem to have a single acquaintance, with the exception of his friend and himself. Who

then could be her betrayer? The question answered itself. Her fall from virtue must have occurred since her father's death, so it must have been Yorke and only he who had had the baseness to take advantage of Kate's weakness, and afterwards, to suit himself, had endeavoured to induce him to marry her.

'To a mind, honest, simple, and brave like Allen Hamilton's, such treachery was unpardonable; and his heart rose in bitter wrath against the man who had wronged and deceived both Kate and himself. Now that his eyes were opened he remembered how anxious Yorke had been that Kate's name should never be mentioned, especially before his wife. He recalled numerous little acts, trivial in themselves, which proved how intimate and close the

connection between them had been ; and he had been fool enough to be Raymond Yorke's dupe ! In the newborn hatred of his quondam friend he almost overlooked Kate's wrong-doing in the longing to avenge both himself and her, for he did not doubt that but for this they both might have been happy together. Amidst all these surging emotions he deeply felt and admired the sense of honour which lifted her so immensely above her fellow-sinner.

'Aroused by these reflections, he was about leaving the spot, when he saw Kate's servant running. Seeing Hamilton, she came up to him, breathless and scared, and implored him, more by signs than words, to return with her.

"What do you mean ? what is it ?" he

cried as, fearful of he knew not what, he hurried her along in the direction she had come.

““Mr Yorke is killed: Miss Mowbray—”

““Hush!” he rejoined, but too late to prevent the woman’s words being overheard by a policeman. The latter in a few moments extracted from the girl what had happened, and the three proceeded to the house accompanied by a doctor whom they summoned on their way. Arrived, it required but a short examination on the part of the surgeon to discover that Raymond Yorke was dead. The distance he had fallen had not been very great, but his temple had struck against an iron railing and his death had been instantaneous. The dead man was carried into a parlour and laid upon the sofa by the

policeman and Hamilton. Kate stood looking on in a sort of half-stupor. She felt sorry and self-reproachful, but no idea of her serious position had yet crossed her mind.

‘Meanwhile, the people of the house stood aloof regarding her ominously, and whispering amongst themselves. Allen Hamilton, taking in the situation at a glance, quietly and without a word led Kate into an adjoining room. Relieved from her presence the landlady and servant who, as I have said, had heard nearly all that had passed between Kate and the wretched man who lay dead on the sofa, poured it all into the attentive ears of the policeman,—doubtless adding details supplied more or less by their own imagination and asserted their conviction that it was

the hand of Miss Mowbray which had pushed Yorke over the low parapet of the balcony. These circumstances were certainly full of suspicion and justified in the policeman's mind the belief of the women that Miss Mowbray had been at least an agent in the result which lay there before their eyes. His duty was clear, and going to the room where Kate sat with Hamilton standing near her in silence, he intimated civilly enough, but firmly, that she must accompany him at once to the police station on the charge of having caused the death of Raymond Yorke.'

Harvey Burnside made another pause. A great silence and a great horror had overtaken his hearers. Renault had heard the worst now and sat motionless. Glancing at his gloomy face Amy timidly

placed her little palm on his tightly clasped hands; he seemed unconscious of her kindly sympathy, but in after days he remembered and appreciated this expression of her self-forgetting love.

‘Kate offered’ continued the narrator ‘no resistance, and having sent for a cab the policeman and Hamilton accompanied her in it to the station.

‘The terrible situation in which Kate found herself appeared to revive in tenfold force the love and pity Allen Hamilton had felt for her before she had told him of her fault.

‘He employed a solicitor to defend her, and the latter it so happened retained me to appear on her behalf at the hearing before the magistrate. The magistrate concluded to send the case for trial, and

Kate being asked if she wished to make any statement, after a moment's hesitation detailed, in tones which carried the conviction of their truth to the minds of all who heard her, the history of her relations with Yorke from the time of her father's death down to the fatal instant in which he lost his life.

‘As the time for the trial approached, the public excitement was only equalled by the sympathy felt for the accused. The bad treatment and the aggravations she had undergone from the dead man ; her youth, her beauty, and her sorrows all told in her favour ; indeed, few but Yorke's widow, who, during his life, had made it miserable, were desirous of her condemnation. The prosecution shewed no anxiety to press the case unduly

against her ; and, in spite of the ugly feature of it, the second wound on the forehead of the deceased caused by the blow from the locket, we had every hope of getting an acquittal.

‘The court was crowded on the eventful morning. Katherine Mowbray was tried for her life, and the whole majesty of the law was moved against one young tender woman. The judge entered with the usual ceremony, counsel took their places, the necessary preliminaries were gone through, the jury sworn almost unnoticed by the spectators—the whole interest was centred in the prisoner at the bar. Ladies, lawyers, the general public, all leaned forward eagerly to get a glimpse of her. She was very pale, but perfectly composed. Her appearance, we

could see, told powerfully with both judge and jury.

‘Their interest and sympathy we much needed, for ours was eminently a sentimental case.

‘The counsel for the prosecution opened his case against the prisoner in a singularly temperate speech, and then the witnesses were called. They did not excite much interest as the facts they deposed to were already known, but the doctor stated that the slight wound made by the locket was of little consequence and could not have caused death, which had been occasioned by the blow from the iron posts. Allen Hamilton was the last witness who was called and his evidence fully confirmed the truth of the statement which had been made by the prisoner herself before the

magistrate. With the reading of this statement to the jury the case for the prosecution was closed.

‘There were obviously no witnesses to call for the defence, but the evidence for the prosecution supplied Kate Mowbray’s leading counsel with abundant materials for a moving address to the jury in which he drew an affecting picture of her happy youth, followed so soon by deep wrongs and misfortunes.

‘The summing up of the judge, marked by much the same view of the facts, followed and at its close the jury instantly acquitted the prisoner.

CHAPTER VIII

‘MY story is nearly finished. As a murmur of satisfaction went through the court, Kate fell fainting into the arms of Susan Turner, (who in view of her liberation had been summoned by Hamilton to take care of her former mistress).

‘A long and serious illness followed in which things past and present were a blank to Kate, but when she was recovering, Allen Hamilton sent to ask her when she would see him. Hearing, how-

ever, from Susan that the mere idea of meeting him again pained and distressed her, he wrote renewing his offer of marriage and promised to take her abroad, or anywhere she might prefer. But if he was generous, so was she. She answered his letter by gratefully thanking him for his goodness, while she refused what she felt would be such an utter sacrifice for him. "It is not," she wrote, "but that under other circumstances such a lot would be extreme happiness to me; as it is, it would be misery for me to feel that I had (after all you have gone through on my account) caused you to resign all social intercourse with your equals, as you would inevitably have to do in marrying a woman who had been the object of public remark and scorn, and

to whom you could never introduce your mother and sister. Let me," she continued, "pass the remainder of my life in obscurity and oblivion; no joy can now enter into my existence; all thoughts of love and friendship are forfeited by one who has proved herself so unworthy. Be happy my good true friend, and forget me until you hear my eyes have for ever closed on this world, then, if possible, I pray you to come and seal your forgiveness on lips which until then will never cease to pray for your happiness."

'Hamilton bowed to her desire, but he did not relax his efforts in her behalf, and still busied himself about her future. At first she expressed a wish to join a sisterhood, but it was intimated that she would only be received as a penitent,

and the course to which she would be subjected would be too severe for one so delicate, weakened as her constitution was by sorrow and privation.

‘Hamilton bestirred himself; friends came forward, who, if they had helped and countenanced her before, would in all probability have prevented the sad catastrophe of her life, and through them a little, and himself a great deal, a fund was raised by which she might live quietly and comfortably. Susan Turner willingly accepted the post of companion and servant to her former nurseling. I knew that a cottage had been taken for her, but not where, until I saw her in church this morning. Whether to tell you all I knew or not, at first I was undecided, and I went to her abode to have an inter-

view with her ; but, though I am satisfied there were occupants in the house, and I was seen, the bell I rang was never answered. It was foolish, for I did not wish unnecessarily to expose her ; but, on consideration and observation, I thought it was only right you should know the truth. Believe me, I have had no animus against her in telling it, for I have ever felt for her the deepest commiseration. I have laid bare to you the first and second volumes of her life ; the third has but commenced, and I fear it does so in a way that points to further trouble and doubt.'

Burnside looked meaningly at Renault as he finished, and the long silence that ensued was broken by the heir so abruptly rising that he upset the heavy dining-

room chair on which he had been seated. Without a word of apology, and heedless of Amy's hand stretched out to detain him, he strode from the room, across the old hall, and, opening the heavy oaken door, stood on the steps, bareheaded, in the cold, dark night, looking down the avenue beyond the church.

His whole brain was stupified and shaken. That Burnside had a story to tell against the woman he loved—yes, loved, although he had never owned it before, even to himself—he had feared; and, if it had been possible, he would willingly have stopped his tongue; but, that it should have been of so shameful a character he had never dreamed. His mind reverted to his wild scheme of getting her to sing in church. He remem-

bered how vehemently he had asserted to the vicar his belief 'that sorrow and trouble might have touched her, but sin and shame never.' Then, forgetting her recognition of Harvey Burnside, he mentally accused him of spite and falsehood, and turned as if he would go in and give him the lie face to face.

He confronted the old butler instead, who, seeing the trouble in his look—a trouble so great that he did not venture to speak—handed him the hat he had just brought out. Renault took it, and, mechanically thanking him, walked down the steps into the darkness beyond. 'There's something amiss with Mr René,' said the old man to one of his underlings in the hall.

'It's along then of the lady up at

Church Cottage. Mr Burnside has been tellin' them in the parlour she's no better than she oughter be, and the young Squire lookin' as black as thunder at him for it,' was John's reply.

And thus the secret, so long safely kept, was begun to be bruited about, while René walked rapidly along—his mother's heart going out uneasily after him—trying to beat down the doubts and fears that beset him.

In his disturbed imagination he saw a grey shadow—its name, he felt, was sin and shame—flit before him in his path, waving its long arms at him in mockery and despair. Where he went, or how he went he was reckless of, his thoughts were in a wild state, and when at last he found himself at the gate of the

Cottage, without considering what he was doing, he leaped the garden paling and walking up to the house concealed himself from observation beside an uncurtained window, through which he could see into a lighted room where Katherine Mowbray sat alone.

CHAPTER IX

WHEN Katherine Mowbray reached her home after her encounter with Harvey Burnside she felt that the calm and peaceful life she had passed for the previous two years was over, and that she must leave her quiet retreat. She did not feel very much moved; her mind was too shocked at the sudden appearance of Harvey Burnside. Apparently on intimate terms with the Squire's family, she felt a presentiment he would not fail

to put them in full possession of her history. To remain in a small place like Odstone, where everybody was acquainted with everybody else, to be shunned and pointed at, was impossible.

While she sat wrapt in these gloomy thoughts, unconscious of the eyes that watched her from without, Susan came into the room, and struck by the unusual sadness depicted upon the face of her mistress, attempted to soothe and console her. Unheeding the words which fell from the lips of her old servant, Kate looked in her face and simply said :

‘We cannot stay here, Susan.’

‘I feared it, my dear, I’ve seen it coming. You’re too young and winsome, pale and sad as you’ve grown, for it not to have come to you.’

‘Feared it ! seen it !’

‘Yes, my dear, and it’s not only me that have seen it, there’s a many in the village that have seen it too, and you being so quiet and lonesome, they’d have talked about it, if I’d have let them, a deal more, busybodies every one of them.’

‘I don’t know what you mean, Susan; you are thinking of something different. What have the people been saying?’

‘I never liked to mention it, dear Miss Kate, and wouldn’t say it now, but I thought you must have noticed, as others have, how he never took his eyes from off your pretty face, how he listened to your sweet singing with all his ears, and loitered about after service to catch another look at you as you passed. I was sorry for I knew it was useless, although in what’s gone before you were more

sinned against than sinning, but I feared it would disturb you if you ever came to know your sweet face had done its work on him.'

'Its work on whom?' she cried, with no inkling of the truth.

'Oh! my dear, young lady, don't look so scared and wild. Who should I mean but the young squire—he who sings in the choir.'

'He admire me! oh! no, no, no! Such a thought would be a greater punishment than I could bear! I swear to you, Susan, I never knew or dreamt of such a thing; my only comfort, only change in this isolation have been my religious exercises, and Heaven only knows what pangs they have often cost me. Then how could I, poor, lost, miserable creature

that I am, bear to think of admiration or love? Have I not, by my wickedness, forfeited all the advantages that once were mine, and deprived myself of privileges that better, happier women may enjoy; and, if,' she went on passionately, 'it were in my dead heart to feel for any man again, how could I forget Allen Hamilton, or, lower still, Raymond Yorke?'

The listener outside could not have left the spot now. He gazed upon the face and form of Katherine Mowbray as she stood in her desolate agony, looking, oh! so beautiful, and, alas! accused out of her own mouth. She paused; the flush died out of her cheek, and, laying her hand on Susan's, she said, in a more composed tone, 'No, dear, it was not

that that has worried me. If I had known it, I do not see why I should have left here; I could have sat in church where Mr Tremleston neither saw nor heard me. But even if it has been as you think, he must have changed his mind by now. This morning, in the Squire's pew, I saw Mr Harvey Burnside.'

'One of the lawyer gentlemen, dear, who you used to tell me about?'

'Yes, nurse, and I am sure he will tell all. When I saw him lean forward and look me in the face this morning my heart almost stopped, and I knew our life here was ended. And he has told,' she went on wildly, 'I am sure he has, as if I had heard him say the words: and I must go; I could not, Susan, stay here for them to point at me. "My brother's blood

crieth unto me from the ground,'” she shrieked, tossing her arms above her head; ‘and I must wander like Cain—desolate, friendless, and alone.’

‘Not while your old nurse lives to love and care for you, my darling.’ And, with tears running down her honest face, Susan held out her arms to the sin-laden woman—held them out to her as when she was an innocent child—and Kate, seeing the look of infinite pity and love in those homely features, fell into the offered embrace and sobbed out, ‘My true and only friend.’

Then, and not till then, René Tremleston moved away from where he had watched for more than an hour, with all his fears confirmed, his hopes, vague as they had been, shattered. The grey shadow

that had seemed to mock him on his outward way no longer appeared to jeer and gibe at him ; but he felt as if it followed at his shoulder, sharing his own gloom and sadness.

When Renault reached home he walked straight into the library, where Harvey Burnside sat reading by the fire. The heir took no notice of his guest, but went up to the table whereon still lay the *Times* of two years back. Indifferently he glanced at the volume, when its title and date arrested his attention, and, opening it, he sat down and read eagerly.

From over his book Burnside watched him, quite sure he was reading Katherine Mowbray's trial. He waited until he saw René's head drop on the page, then rising

he approached and said, 'Well, René, and was I not right?'

'Right?' echoed the other, scornfully raising his head. 'So right, that I would neither have believed this printed word nor yours, but I have heard it from her own lips.'

'You have seen and spoken to Kate Mowbray?'

'I have seen but not spoken to her. There is a pair of us, Burnside,' he went on recklessly, 'you have been talebearer, and I have played the eavesdropper.'

Burnside was so relieved that he did not ask the how or where. Of all things he dreaded Tremlestone having an interview with Kate. He remembered how enthralled she had held Allen Hamilton even through disgrace and degradation,

and he could not credit that after two years' desolation she would refuse to profit by the infatuation of the young Squire, who he knew was quite capable of going to any lengths of romantic folly, so he let René's rudeness pass and said, 'My dear fellow, do not think for a moment that in telling her sad history, I had any unkind motive towards Kate Mowbray for whom I feel the sincerest pity. I am certain she saw me this afternoon, and if she had been wise enough to have let me in, and had consented to have left here quietly, and at once her secret should never, so far as I am concerned, have been revealed. But seeing, pardon me, your infatuation for her, I determined you should not lose so sweet and good a little wife as Amy, whose fortune—yes,

René, I am practical and mercenary enough to add that qualification—would bring peace to your father and safety to the old estate, for the sake of a woman—’

‘ Who, in spite of all her sins, disgrace, and poverty, I love better than Amy’s gold and innocence. With these unanswerable words, the heir of the ancient Tremleston name and estates swung out of the library, and, seeking the privacy of his own room, turned the key against any possible intruder.

Harvey Burnside looked after him uneasily, and, for some minutes, paced the floor in anxious thought. He was doubtful now whether he had pursued the wisest course in exposing Kate so publicly, and thus enlisting on her side so rash and intemperate a champion. However, it was

done now ; and, at last, he joined the drawing-room circle, and, sitting down by Mrs Tremleston, who had been watching the door in hope of seeing her wayward son enter, he engaged her and the Squire in serious conversation. By his advice, the anxious mother went to Renault's room to beg admission, but though he answered her civilly, she could not induce him to open the door to her ; and she went away with a sigh, to report to the Squire how useless her errand of love had been, and to try and comfort her husband. For Amy's money was much needed to save the old house ; and if Renault proved rebellious, the Squire knew that there was no alternative for him but to leave the roof-tree which had sheltered his forefathers for centuries.

CHAPTER X

It was a cold day which followed the Sunday that Harvey Burnside had encountered Kate Mowbray at Odstone, and there were few, who had a comfortable home, who cared to leave the bright fire to brave the keen wind which ever and anon came blowing up from the sea. For Renault Tremleston neither cheerful hearth nor cosy nook seemed to have any attraction—never very sociable, he now quite avoided any companionship.

It was breakfast time ; the Squire sat at the table looking out at the view from the window, not much re-assured by a conversation he had just had with Burnside, who, taking a more hopeful view of matters in the morning, endeavoured to persuade him that René had only been seized with a passing fancy which, when over, would turn him all the more readily to Amy. He was busily occupied with these thoughts when his eldest son entered and, with scarcely a salutation to those present, took his seat.

No one spoke to Renault Tremleston when he was in one of his moods, and the breakfast proceeded almost in silence, and directly it was over he left the table. The Squire followed him into the hall and according to arrangement with Burnside

that Renault should not, if possible, have an opportunity of meeting Kate, asked him to go over to Oldtown with him, but he was refused with the excuse 'that he found his own company bad enough, and anyone else's would be unbearable.'

The Squire's face flamed at this rough reply. Seeing how pained he looked, René was ashamed of his rudeness, and laying his hand on his shoulder, he said, in a choking voice, 'Forgive me, father, I did not know what I was saying. Let me alone for a little while.'

If on his side Renault Tremleston was disturbed and miserable, what were his feelings compared to Katherine Mowbray's? She had been so long unmolested in the house Hamilton had

found her, that she had begun to hope her days might be peacefully spent there. Susan's information about the young Squire's admiration and the talk it had caused scarcely moved her now, though a week before it would have agitated her in no small degree; as it was, it only added to her conviction that she must leave Odstone.

She passed a terrible night, and many hours Susan watched beside her before any sleep visited the weary eyelids; then she slept heavily till noon when she awoke, and rising, dressed herself. This done, she went downstairs and stood looking at Susan as she prepared the dinner; when it was ready she made Susan share it with her, as if in the renewed sense of her loneliness she

clung still more to the only woman on earth who would have taken her by the hand.

Dinner over, she went and looked out on the bare and leafless garden for some time, then turning round she exclaimed suddenly, 'I am going out, Susan, I cannot stay at home.'

'Where are you going, my dear young lady? Don't tire yourself.'

'I am going down to the sea. I want to breathe, I feel choked here.'

Susan made no reply, but fetched her mistress' bonnet and warm cloak. Tenderly she wrapped her up and afterwards watched her out of sight with many a misgiving at her faithful heart.

Kate walked rapidly on past the old church towards the sea, nearly a mile

thence. Unobserved she had been there sometimes on a summer's evening with Susan, so knew her way well enough.

She had reached the beach and was looking out dreamily over the sea when she heard footsteps, and glancing uneasily towards the rock from whence the sound proceeded her eyes encountered those of Renault Tremleston.

He was less startled than she. His thoughts had been only of her ever since he had left the Hall in the morning wandering aimlessly about; and now half bewildered, as the brain always does become if it dwells exclusively on one topic which has neither range nor outlet, he was hardly surprised to see her standing before him. Then rushed across his mind what once he had deemed her,

and what now he knew her to be, and he fixed on her a look of intense mournfulness and disappointment which, alas! her broken and sensitive nature interpreted as one of horror and disgust. She was wrong, utterly wrong, so to misunderstand him. He had sincerely meant what he had avowed to Harvey Burnside the night before, and he was conscious of no feeling but of love and pity for her.

Seeing her standing there so fragile, so forlorn, he would have held out his hands to her and proffered his sympathy and friendship, but an awful change swept over the lovely countenance, and she recoiled from him so deprecatingly as terror struck she moved to a fragment of broken rock near, and sank upon it dizzy and overcome at such a meeting, that seeing

her so distressed he did not dare to speak, but walked slowly and sorrowfully away.

Kate heard his retreating feet tread the pebbly beach, as if in a dream. What she had so long dreaded had come to pass, and the only person in Odstone who had care for had been the first, to her distracted imagination, to shun her. Vividly she remembered Susan's description of his admiration for her, and now she appeared to have awakened repugnance in him. It was the first meeting with such a sentiment, the first shock.

At the time of Yorke's unfortunate death, and afterwards at her trial, so much commiseration had been expressed for her,—his conduct, though he had paid for it with his life, had been so inexcusable—popular sympathy had been so entirely

on her side, that she had almost escaped the hard judgment that would have been passed on most women placed in her position.

Now it seemed to rush in upon her like a mighty wave. The bleak, cold aspect of the vast ocean rolling at her feet represented no drearier waste than her desolate soul. Black shadows in the coming twilight affrighted her troubled spirit. Yorke's voice seemed to call for vengeance on her from the heaving sea; she felt her long-dead mother, her father, who had reared her so tenderly, looked down on her to reproach her for her disregard of purity and honour. Memories of her happy, innocent girlhood, of Yorke's passionate love for her, his face as he fell beneath her hand, the dark time pending

her detention, her trial returned upon her with over-powering force, effacing all hope of pardon and peace. Horrible whispers from the seething waves, which now lapped her feet, brought her partly to herself, and gathering together the last remnants of her strength, she tore from the maddening voices which, to her terrified senses, seemed to follow her as she ran over steep incline and slippery stones towards the little church where she had so long sought comfort.

CHAPTER XI

WITH a hurried step Katherine entered the church and found a secluded corner, unperceived by the vicar and an assistant who still lingered in the sacred building, giving the final touches to the preparations for the fast approaching Christmas. Kate's spirit gave way under the influence of the stillness and solitude ; she buried her face in her hands, while hard, dry sobs shook her slender frame. With every element of her nature at war within her, her soul

full of darkness and horror, Kate bent under her load of sin, a victim to an agony of despair. Heaven seemed closed to her; the future loomed black and threatening; she saw herself a spurned and despised outcast, without a ray of light to cheer or comfort her.

How long she suffered thus with her hands holding fast the chair—to which her throbbing head was pressed—before her, she knew not; but it had grown late, the little church was dark, except for one or two gaslights against the wall, when she heard a kind, firm voice, say, ‘You are in trouble, will you not let me help you?’

She did not answer or even look up, but the trembling ceased, and she did not shrink from the kindly detaining

hand. Thus encouraged, the voice went on, 'You once sent me a message, that if you had need to apply to anyone, it should be to me. I see you are in trouble, and require that consolation which it is my office and privilege to give. Will you not redeem your promise?'

She looked up then and showed her interlocutor the face he had always hitherto seen so subdued and calm, now disturbed and convulsed with grief. But she did not speak and he pleaded again.

'A sorrow borne alone is twice as hard to bear. Be assured if you give me your confidence it shall be respected.'

'How can I tell you!' she at last moaned, as she clasped and unclasped her little hands. 'It is so shameful.'

The clergyman had taken a great interest in her, an interest that though not of the same kind as Renault Tremleston's, was scarcely less profound, and often during the services he had found himself watching her and wondering what secret her life held. From her extreme seclusion, her shrinking air, he had feared that that secret was not altogether creditable, so it was with a feeling more of pain than disappointment at her words, that he answered solemnly, 'Who shall stand faultless before the purity of God? We have all offended against His goodness.'

'But not as I have,' she rejoined. 'There is no sinner in this village, however great, but who might start from contact with such as me. Have I not

known and felt it? Has it been nothing to me that I have lived these two years, amidst but not among you, desolate and alone, without my lips opening to a soul save the old nurse and friend of my childhood? You have asked me, Mr Stafford, to give you the reason of my distress; yours is the only voice in Odstone that has afforded me comfort and solace, and till yesterday I thought I had found it. And now when I stand discovered and disgraced, I see how self-deceived I have been and my aching heart would break if it were not relieved. My one and only request is that in your judgment of me, you will not shrink from me as a too guilty thing.'

She held up her hand when he would have spoken, and kneeling still, she re-

lated with a voice broken with emotion her miserable tale. She did not spare herself, did not give expression to one reproach against the dead, but the heart of her listener swelled with pity as she spoke.

The relief of speaking was immeasurable, and when she ended her poor overcharged heart gave way and she broke into a passion of tears while she waited for the promised consolation.

The vicar stood motionless as she poured out the recital of her troubles to him. He was not surprised at her connection with Yorke, he had long suspected she had been the victim of some man's treachery, but he was utterly shocked at his death. This feeling increased as a flood of recollections rushed over him, and

forgetting for a time his office of comforter he bent forward and demanded in a tone that dried her tears:

‘What is your name?’

‘Katherine Mowbray,’ was the wondering reply.

‘Then it was Raymond Yorke who fell beneath your hand?’

She bowed her head in silence, and with some surprise and disappointment saw the clergyman move away and lean in deep thought upon the chancel rails.

His thoughts were far away: he saw the pleasant country vicarage where he had been born and bred, and where his father’s ward, a beautiful girl, had grown up with him. How he had loved her, worked for her, and fondly hoped she had returned his love, until one fatal day his false friend

came—the friend who had been his college chum, and to whom he had entrusted all his heart's secrets—and stole her from him, and eloped with her. The thought of his mad, passionate rage when he had learnt their perfidy rose up again before him as he remembered how he had followed in their steps to avenge himself, at least, on him; and only a sudden illness saved him from, perhaps, an awful crime. Years had passed since then, bringing forgiveness and softer feelings in their train; but he still could remember the time when his aged father pleaded with him to forego his cherished scheme of revenge against his quondam associate, and how reluctantly he had yielded. And then his conscience slowly awaking, he forebore taking orders until he had, at anyrate, tried to forgive.

But when, at length, he had entered the church, the hard task he had had to conquer his feelings with which he had heard how the faithless one had become a neglected wife,—his adversary's death under such awful circumstances.

And the instrument of it lay crushed, humbled, and repentant a few paces from him.

He raised his head, he saw the Divine Sufferer on the Cross, and his generous heart went out in pity and sympathy to the sinner whom he felt the Friend of sinners would in no wise reject.

How could he then in common justice judge her when he had himself nourished such anger?

He went back to where she knelt, too exhausted by her late emotions even to

weep now, and laying his hand on the bowed head before him, he gently said, 'Katherine Mowbray, were I one of the most perfect of men it would ill become me to pass severe judgment upon you, but in regard to Raymond Yorke, I am almost as guilty as yourself. You look surprised, but as you have confessed to me your errors, so must I own to you that if ever, in will, one man murdered another, I killed Raymond Yorke. He robbed me of that which was dearer to me than life, and in return (if in mercy I had not been prevented) I should have slain him as he stood. I have tried, my God, Thou knowest! I have tried to forgive and forget, but the full extent and horror of my sin never came upon me with such force until this last hour

when the recital of your injuries has brought it home to me. What indeed am I that I should shrink from you! Let us rather, my erring sister, kneel together and pray for forgiveness to Him who has shewn such mercy to us; and if in my office and life I am able to absolve and console you, be assured I do so in all humility, and with a full consciousness of my own personal unworthiness.'

CHAPTER XII

TEARS fell fast down the pale cheeks of Katherine Mowbray as she listened to the earnest prayer of the good and self-denying servant of the Gospel, kneeling beside her; but they had lost their bitterness. After a brief interval, she lifted her eyes to the image of the Crucified, her countenance was relieved of its pained expression, and she felt soothed and calmed.

A few minutes spent thus, and the vicar ceased. He rose and watched her silently, then blessing her, he assisted her to her feet.

Her late excitement had so worn out her slender frame, that it was with a decided feeling of relief Mr Stafford saw Susan enter the church seeking her mistress, about whose safety she had grown anxious. He gladly gave Kate over to the tender care of her faithful attendant, and kindly pressing her hand, promised to see her on the morrow. He watched from the porch the two women out of sight, then going back into the now deserted church, knelt down at the altar railings. Well nigh an hour had passed, still the priest remained buried in prayer and meditation,

while the Divine figure looked down on him with Its pitying eyes.

Late that evening, on his homeward way, the vicar brushed against a man coming towards him. He started and saw Renault Tremleston, wild and haggard.

‘I have been wandering about all day,’ he said hoarsely. ‘I have just come from the vicarage—I wanted to see you.’

‘Come back with me,’ was the reply. The clergyman asked no questions. He had no need. One look at Tremleston was enough; and, regardless of his own weariness and emotion, he led him into his own house.

It was late in the afternoon of the next day. Christmas Eve was being kept quietly at the Hall, for though

the Squire had given orders that the poor should receive their usual doles, and that the servants should have their rejoicings, he was too anxious and worried by his embarrassments to have any gay visitors. If Renault would only prove reasonable, all would be well, if not, all the old place must go. The mortgagees were threatening to foreclose.

So, on this afternoon, there were only Mrs Tremleston, Lady Spenlow, their daughters, and Reggie Spenlow in the pleasant little tea room at the Hall. The girls had just come in from the schools where they had been distributing the Christmas prizes and charities, tired and cold. They were now seated comfortably before the blazing wood fire, toasting their feet, and leisurély sipping their tea.

Chattering away merrily with Reggie Spenlow (a faint sigh now and then from Amy) they did not listen to the whispered conversation of their elders, whose topic was René. His aunt denouncing him for his infatuation about 'that disreputable woman,' his dishonourable treatment of Amy, and his generally undutiful conduct, while poor Mrs Tremleston was doing her best to excuse, if she could not justify, her darling's behaviour to his indignant relative.

In the midst of this the door opened, and René entered the room. He seemed more composed than he had been since the recital of Burnside's story; and his mother's eyes brightened as he sat down beside her and asked for a cup of tea.

'You shall have it,' said Lillian, 'though it is not good for the voice, for you have

to practise "Though poor be the Chamber." You have not sung it since Saturday, and it will never be ready for to-morrow. I will play the accompaniment for you.'

'I will not trouble you,' he answered coldly. 'I do not sing the anthem.'

'Not sing the anthem, René! What will Mr Stafford say? He will be so disappointed.'

'He knows and approves of my decision. I told him yesterday. Mark Prunes will be delighted to take my place.'

'And spoil it,' pouted Lillian, who had set her heart on René singing the Christmas anthem at matins the following day; but before her mother, who guessed the reason of his change of mind, could interpose, the door opened again, admitting the Squire and Mr Stafford.

René shook hands silently with the latter, and directly the usual salutations had been exchanged, Lillian turned to the vicar and loudly lamented the loss to the choir.

‘I am sorry too, my dear Miss Tremleston, for the Carol is not likely to be rendered nearly so well by Prunes as it would have been by your brother, but he has explained his reasons to me, which I think are sufficient.’

‘It is all for the sake of that woman with her pale face and sly ways,’ irately put in Lady Spenlow.

‘What woman, Lady Spenlow?’ steadily demanded the vicar, who saw with what difficulty René restrained himself.

‘Why, the hypocrite who has been living amongst you for the past two years,

and has contrived to bewitch you all with her affected airs and graces. I thought I had seen her face before, but could not think where, until Mr Burnside brought it back to my recollection. I happened to be in court when Katherine Mowbray was tried.'

'Happened! Come, mother, that is good,' irreverently broke in Reginald Spenlow. 'You know you go to every criminal trial where you can get a seat with a good view of the prisoner.' A smile went round the circle, for Lady Spenlow's predilection was well-known, but she took no notice of her graceless son.

'I do not think Katherine Mowbray has been a hypocrite,' said Mrs Tremleston quietly. 'She has lived here entirely to

herself, and though her society has been sought, and shocking as her story is, yet her self-chosen isolation must have been a great trial to her.'

'Great indeed,' replied the vicar. 'I had an interview with her yesterday; and never in all my experience have I seen a being so overwhelmed with remorse and grief. That she is sincerely and thoroughly penitent I am convinced; and there are many noble points in her character which we should neither dare nor desire to overlook. I have been again with her to-day; indeed, have only just left her; and if ever a woman needed another's sympathy, Katherine Mowbray is that woman. If she has sinned, she has suffered and repented exceedingly. With great difficulty I have obtained her pro-

mise to present herself for true reconciliation with her Redeemer at our great festival to-morrow. Dear Mrs Tremleston I hear you know her history, and I have now come to beg you for the sake of Him whose birthday we are about to commemorate, to recollect it was for her, and such as her, that He was born ; and if she should be near you, or it is in your power to do her any little service, will you welcome her as a sister, an erring sister, without doubt, but, nevertheless a sister in Him who died for us all?’

There was a momentary silence in the room, and then Renault’s mother rose, and placing her hands on those of the earnest interceder, she said, ‘You have not pleaded in vain—I will try to help her.’

CHAPTER XIII

It is hardly light on the morning of the Nativity, the stars are just paling as the dim daylight dawns over the sea, and comes stealing over the land. The gate of the cottage opens and Katherine Mowbray comes out to attend the early celebration at Odstone church. There is no false peace on the sweet face now, her countenance bears a gentle subdued look that tells of the calm within, and though she does not dare to lift her eyes as she enters

the church, she does not shrink from her fellow creatures as she did three days ago.

The service begins with all the solemn joy of the sacred season, and though Kate's voice does not audibly swell the hymns and responses, her whole soul goes forth in humility and praise. The *Agnus Dei* has been sung and the communicants make their way to the altar rails. All the Squire's family are present. But the number of communicants at this service is not very large, still Kate, who had with great difficulty mustered her courage to approach the holy table, finds that there is no room for her. A horrible dread overtakes her. Was it that there was no place for such as she?

The vicar perceived her perplexity and paused. Mrs Tremleston looked up, she

saw the faltering step, and divining the cause of Kate's hesitation, beckoned to her. Amy who knelt next made room, and so between the mother of Renault Tremleston and the girl who loved him, Katherine Mowbray received the bond of reconciliation with her crucified Lord.

Directly after the sacred elements had been partaken of, Mrs Tremleston saw Kate's head droop forward, and but for her friend's assistance she would have fallen. She was raised instantly and carried into the vestry. A doctor was hurriedly called, and bending over the quiet form he carefully felt her heart. Little Amy knelt awestruck by her side, and Renault, for the first time touching the woman he loved so well, supported her head. Mr Stafford entered just as

the joyous notes of the choristers were heard, and Amy whispered :

‘She does not hear the Gloria!’

‘She sings it,’ said the vicar, with the angels in heaven.’

For she was dead. Her sorrow-laden soul had taken flight to its rest just as she had received the ‘Cup of Salvation,’ and tears from the eyes of good and gentle women bedewed the face on which a holy rapture rested, never more to be disturbed by sin or sorrow.

Softly and reverently they bore her to the home that had sheltered her since the terrible time of two years back, and gave into the charge of the weeping Susan all that was left of the mistress she had loved and cared for so well.

Harvey Burnside—the only person in

Odstone who knew anything about poor Kate's antecedents, and the vicar went later on to see what were her last instructions and found a letter addressed to Allen Hamilton. Every paper was neatly folded in order, and Susan, in broken accents, told the visitors that the day before, her mistress had spent the greater part of her time in arranging them.

The letter was despatched to Allen Hamilton, and directly he could obey its summons he came down to Odstone to fulfil the wish of her he had loved so dearly. Time had not with him brought forgetfulness. Tenderly he pressed his lips to the peaceful brow; and it was his hand that finally placed the handkerchief

over the marble countenance and hid it from human view for ever.

* * * * *

It is the last day of the old year: A small group is standing round an open grave close to the path Katherine Mowbray's weary feet have so often trod on her way to the sanctuary, and where she is now about to be laid to rest.

Mrs Tremleston and Amy are there,—it is their loving fingers that have woven the white wreath and cross now lying upon the coffin.

Allen Hamilton, sad and thoughtful, stands at the head of the grave, while the vicar and choir chant the beautiful service for the dead: their voices ring out clear in the wintry air.

When all is over, Hamilton still lingers—loth to depart from her. Looking up he sees Renault Tremleston close beside him. Mr Stafford has told him all the circumstances of Kate's life since she came to Odstone, and his heart goes out in gratitude to the man who throughout had been his dead love's steadfast friend and champion. He holds out his hand, which Tremleston grasps; and over the coffin of Katherine Mowbray, the two men who had loved her to the peril of their happiness met in sympathy and life-long friendship.

CONCLUSION

My story really ended with Katherine Mowbray's life ; but I daresay my reader will be glad to hear that Renault Tremleston gave the Squire relief from his embarrassments, and made Amy happy the autumn after Kate's death.

He had been much softened by it ; and though he never forgot the sweet face that he had watched from Odstone church choir, he did his best to make Amy a good husband. Her gentle sympathy

for Kate did what her love for him never could ; and I think his first warm feeling for her—though he never knew it—dated from the time when she stole her little hand into his the night Harvey Burnside told his terrible tale.

The wedding was a quiet one ; and on the first Sunday after they returned to the Hall from their tour, they stopped to look at a grave on which bloomed the late autumnal flowers. A crucifix had been placed by Allen Hamilton at the head, and the Divine sufferer appeared to watch the slumberer beneath. Amy stooped to clear away some fallen leaves ; and Renault said musingly, ‘ I loved her very much, Amy.’

‘ I know it, René,’ she quietly answered as she took his arm, and they walked into

church, where they sat side by side. Renault never sang in the choir again.

The story of her who sinned and suffered so deeply, and who paid so great a Penalty, is well known in Odstone now. But the memory of her better qualities, her true repentance, is shrined in the hearts of those who loved and knew her best.

THAT TERRIBLE TUESDAY

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CHAPTER I

‘You will repent your words, Bertie, and must apologise for your rudeness.’

‘I shall do nothing of the sort.’

‘Then you will have to do without me.’

‘I daresay I can manage. Good morning.’

But John Budd was too angry to be polite, and without another word bounced out of the room,—out of the house, slamming the door behind him.

And this happened three months ago. And now as she knelt on the drawing-room rug one dark November evening, with one little shapely hand—more marks of rough work about it than it had exhibited in August—resting on the mantelpiece, Bertie Powis was repenting in her mind that she had let her temper get the better of her and that she had offended John Budd. It had been such a ridiculous quarrel altogether, arising first from John Budd proposing a certain cousin of his, Eleanor Jameson, should accompany him and Bertie to the theatre one evening. Bertie objected, and though he included Nancy Powis in the invitation and assured Bertie his cousin was engaged and nothing to him, yet she was so indignant that her wishes were slighted that she went out

for a walk the whole of the next Sunday afternoon, leaving her mother to entertain John Budd,—and not alone. She took as companion a certain youth whom John detested. High words followed. One thing led to another, and the affair culminated in the sentences that commence this chapter.

‘You have done a foolish thing, Bertie,’ sighed her mother, who missed John Budd’s little attentions.

‘He will come round in time; he always has before,’ was the confident reply.

But he did not do as he had done before. And humiliating as it was, Bertie saw no way out of her difficulties but to write and apologise as he had said she must. They were very poor the Powises. Since Mr Powis’ death, poor

Mrs Powis tried to keep things together in a little house at Champion Hill, but it was a hard struggle and nothing prospered; and now Bertie had quarrelled with John Budd who had, since he had taken a fancy to her, not only been generous to her, but to all the family. His help suddenly withdrawn, various wants of those around her seemed to increase with wonderful rapidity, and it was Bertie all looked to for relief. There was Nancy who had so great a musical talent and who required the money to join classes; there was patient little Alice who not only wanted expensive tonics, but had been lately recommended to the famous Dr ——; there was Bruce, the idle elder brother, who said if he could only get five pounds he could get em-

ployment; then Jack had written for ten pounds; and there were the housekeeping bills. Fifty pounds would do it all, and John Budd was the impersonation of fifty pounds many times over.

‘You must come down, you know, Bertie,’ said Nancy turning round on the music stool, ‘and pay him out for it after you are married to him. We shall all have to turn out of here if you don’t, and think how awful that would be.’

Bertie nodded. Looking sorrowfully into the fire she made up her mind. For her mother’s sake she would humiliate herself. She did not care so much for John Budd as she did for her own kin, but she had missed him the last few weeks and did not doubt his goodnatured readiness to be reconciled. She could not

bear the thought that the few remaining relics of their better days should be swept away,—that all the efforts they had made to keep up a respectable appearance should go for nought.

So she wrote as pretty and as conciliating a letter as she could to her angry lover, and all next day expected he would come in person to answer it. Day deepened into evening, but no John Budd had appeared, affectionate, repentant, and forgiving.

Bertie, dressed with unusual care (soothe to say she was at times a little untidy, but always charming), was making the tea, with a thoughtful look in her sweet eyes, when a violent ring pealed so loudly through the little house that she nearly dropped the tea caddy.

‘I will open the door. Jane’s as black as the sweep we had this morning,’ said the energetic and plain spoken Nancy flying to the door.

‘Mind you don’t irritate him, Bertie,’ implored poor Mrs Powis. ‘Remember what he has done for us all and will do. You are twenty-two and will never have such another chance, and do smoothe your hair.’

‘It looks lovely,’ replied her daughter, giving a defiant toss to a very pretty head, ‘besides he will be only too glad to see me and eat humble’——

But before she could finish her sentence her countenance dropped as she saw Nancy come in with a letter, which she tossed over to her elder sister.

With four pairs of eyes watching her anxiously, Bertie sat down and read—

‘DEAR MISS POWIS.

‘I am sorry you should have thought that you had caused me any pain. I soon recovered from the annoyance of our last interview, when I reflected how unsuited we were to each other.

‘From your long silence I concluded you were of the same opinion.

‘Wishing you every happiness, believe me with kind regards to your mother and sisters,

‘Yours truly,

‘JOHN BUDD.’

Her pride more than her heart was touched, but the blow was terribly heavy as she read the cold, cruel words.

Nancy caught the letter as it fell from her sister's nerveless hand, and the rest of the family perused it over her shoulder.

'The beast,' ejaculated Nancy, 'how I should like to thrash him. An ugly little monster! He always looked a snob.'

'Don't be so vulgar, Nancy,' reproved her mother. 'If Bertie had only kept her temper and not been so unreasonably jealous, of course this would not have happened. I am not surprised,—Mr Budd could not be a gentleman.'

'A stingy brute! not even to send a stiver. He might have enclosed a farewell fifty note,' grumbled Bruce.

'If he had dared,' blazed out Bertie

coming to the table, 'I would have torn it up and thrown it in his face.'

'That sounds very grand, Bertie,' remarked her mother, 'but fifty pounds would save us now.'

Poor Bertie! She had humiliated herself for their sakes, and no one thought whether she cared or not. Not that they did not love her, but they used to regard her as the principal prop and influence in the family, and to look on it as a grievance if she failed.

Only little Alice ventured to take her part.

'If it is hard for us, it is much harder for Bertie,' she said timidly, with a loving look towards her sister who was cutting the bread and butter. 'It was only for her sake that John Budd gave us so

much, and now he insults her and she has to bear the loss of his love when she loves him.'

'You dear little thing! Don't worry yourself by thinking I grieve for the loss of him; though I am sorry for your sakes. Do you think,' Bertie continued with flashing eyes, as she harangued the whole tea table—with upraised butter knife—that she looked a formidable little personage, 'that if I had loved him ever so little that I could have borne to bear the things you have all said against him, however true they may be? I would have fought you all in his defence.'

'Look how the creature has turned out,' chimed in Nancy.

'And would you have my love vanish at the first cold wind? Could I care

for him one minute and be indifferent the next just to order?’

‘I shall cut the snob dead,’ put in Bruce.

‘If ever I see him,’ said his sister, ‘I shall show my utter indifference by being excessively polite.’

‘I daresay that Eleanor Jameson has been poisoning his mind against you,’ remarked the mother.

‘I don’t see that; she does not even know us. And if she had, and he had really cared, it would have made him cling to me the more. Is it not proverbial that if you want people to stick to each other, let someone speak against one to the other? John Budd did not really care any more for me than I for him. I am no hypocrite, and freely own that I

merited this insulting answer, as I wrote from interested motives.'

'That is all very fine. But who else will give us fifty pounds?' put in Mrs Powis.

'I will,' replied the undaunted Bértie. 'Don't look incredulous, my dears; a bright inspiration seized me while I was cutting the bread and butter. I have a solitary shilling somewhere about, and with it I go up to town to-morrow and bring back fifty pounds.'

CHAPTER II

BERTIE POWIS went up to town the following afternoon.

Strange to relate, though she was a pretty girl, she did not, after the fashion of most heroines when travelling, meet with a fascinating young man, with newspapers and periodicals and soft, white hands, in the train, who immediately struck up a close intimacy with her, which was to ripen into a dearer feeling ; though I do not deny that her golden hair

and dark grey eyes may have had something to do with the politeness with which the carriage door was opened for her at London Bridge, and also with the admiration which was bestowed on her as she wended her way through the crowded city.

She was used enough to such glances, and it was not the attention she met with that caused her heart to beat so fast as she gained 117 King Edward Street and looked doubtfully down the passage leading to Messrs Aspinall & Son's offices before she traversed it.

The expedition which had appeared so easy the night before looked more formidable now, and she did not feel so assured of success. But she never thought of turning back, and after a moment's

hesitation she stepped up boldly to the glass door and knocked.

‘Come in!’ was shouted in reply. And in she went and encountered the stare of two young men who looked like articulated clerks, and an older man of a lower standing. All were seated at desks, but more talk than work seemed to be the chief occupation of the juniors, who stared at the new comer with all their might while their elder went forward.

Bertie was not shy. ‘I want to see Mr Aspinall,’ she said.

‘Mr Aspinall is out, miss, but Mr Robert is in.’

‘I would rather see Mr Aspinall,’ she answered. ‘Will he be long?’

‘Perhaps half-an-hour, miss.’

‘Then I will wait.’

The old clerk placed a chair for her, gave her a newspaper, and went back to his work. Bertie soon got tired of the *Times* and looked about. Then she found the young clerks' admiration somewhat obtrusive, especially as every now and then they whispered to each other and giggled. If she had not been anxious, they might have talked and laughed as much as they liked for what she cared, but their light-heartedness jarred on her anxious mind and she turned and looked at the clock so often that at last the old clerk said,

'I am afraid Mr Aspinall is being kept later than he thought, miss. Would you not like to see Mr Robert ?

'Perhaps I had better,' said Bertie, fearing her presence might be an intrusion;

and the old man, after asking her name, vanished into an inner office, and, soon returning, beckoned to her and introduced her into the presence of a gentleman sitting at a writing table.

He was, she was relieved to find (for she feared to see quite a youth), over thirty years of age; and the expression of his blue eyes was meant to be encouraging as he kindly asked what he could do for her.

‘I beg your pardon,’ she faltered as she took the seat he offered her, ‘but I thought as Mr Aspinall knew my poor father he might kindly advise me in a little business matter.’

‘I am sure he will be very pleased. Was your father the late Mr Powis of Elm Court Temple? if so, I remember

him well. I daresay I shall do as well as my father if you will confide in me.'

Thus kindly addressed, Bertie disclosed a good many of their troubles, and the difficulty she was in just at present. She tried to be as concise as possible, and did not distress her listener with any tears; and the sad, little story did not lose any of its pathos from being told with gentle dignity by lips that were red and trembling.

'I had a great disappointment yesterday'—she did not say what it was—'and have now but one resource left. I had left to me, by my godmother, a reversionary interest, with two other people, in a leasehold house in Canterbury Street, Pimlico, and I am told that if I wait till the present tenant dies, my share will be worth, at least, two hundred pounds; but

I want some money at once, and would rather take half now than wait. I have brought a copy of the will and some other papers I thought might be useful. Would you be so good as to look over them and see if I could get fifty pounds at once ?'

He could not restrain a smile at her innocence and simple trust. Poor child! she thought it was but to ask for and to have the money. The reversion was hardly saleable, and anyhow a transfer of it would take time.

As he bent over the papers seeking for words which might lessen the disappointment he knew he must cause her, the door opened and an elderly gentleman entered who glanced enquiringly first at the pretty flushed face and then at Mr Robert Aspinall, who answered the look

by introducing the newcomer to Bertie as his father, and then explaining her position to him.

Mr Aspinall listened as patiently as his son had done and even more kindly, for he sat down by his fair client's side and from time to time patted the little hand in a fatherly way as the details of the struggling life were laid bare to him.

But then perhaps like a good many sly old gentlemen he took advantage of his age. However that may be, Bertie did not feel so embarrassed as she did before his entrance, and when Mr Robert had finished speaking and his father asked her a few questions, she answered him as readily as if she had known him intimately for years.

‘But, my poor little girl,’ he said

feelingly as she told him she had promised to take home the money for immediate wants, 'you cannot sell a reversion as a linen draper does a silk dress. We must find a purchaser for you, and if you were to get the business completed in a month we lawyers would think it very quick work.'

She had borne up bravely until now; she had never allowed the thought of failure to enter her mind; but at the downfall of her hopes, tears filled her eyes and her lips quivered so pitifully that Robert Aspinall looked down on the papers before him, unwilling to witness her distress, and his father blew his nose, coughed, cleared his throat, and took one or two turns up and down the room, then he went round to his son and

said : ‘ Robert, come with me to my own room while Miss Powis composes herself. I want to speak to you.’

Left to herself, Bertie dried her eyes, and tried to hope that, perhaps, she might be able to take home with her, at least, the promise of help ; and when the two gentlemen returned, it was a quiet, if sad, little face that greeted them.

Then Mr Robert went back to his own seat, and Mr Aspinall sat down beside her and, taking her hand in his, said very seriously, ‘ My dear, many years ago, before you were born or even thought of, a young and struggling man was rendered such assistance by your good father that, instead of being at sixty years of age a mere clerk, he is the head of a prosperous firm.

‘In course of years your father and the man he helped drifted insensibly apart, though I trust the gratitude for my benefactor—for, of course, my dear, you can see I am recalling my own early struggles—has never diminished, and I can assure you if I had known you and your mother had been so distressed, I should have considered it my duty and privilege to assist you. And it is a great pleasure to me that in your trouble you sought me out. So, after consulting my son and partner, he and I have decided on advancing you fifty pounds on your reversion, and if you will trust your papers with us, we will see how we can further assist you. So here is the cheque, my dear, and God bless you.’ And Mr Aspinall gave the imprisoned hand a hearty shake, and Mr Robert smiled cheerfully upon her.

The revulsion of feeling was almost too much for Bertie. She looked at the cheque, she tried to thank them, but the words would not come. She turned red and then so pale that Mr Robert ran to a funny little cupboard and produced a bottle and wine-glass, which latter he filled from the former, and then held to her lips, and after a sip or two, a few gasps, and a great many smiles, she felt better, and said she was sorry she had been so foolish, but was so pleased and gratified, etc., etc.

‘And now, my love,’ continued the old gentleman, ‘you seem a bright, sharp girl, and mother seems to depend upon you, don’t you think you might try and earn a little income for yourself if you were put in the way?’

‘Oh ! I have tried, Mr Aspinall, but I

can never get much to do. When, first, poor papa died, I applied for a governess' situation, but I had never been out before nor educated for such a post, and no one would have me'—'Too pretty,' mentally ejaculated Mr Robert—'and since then I have done embroidery, and, oh! it is so much work and such little pay.'

'I daresay, I daresay. But we are solicitors to the Cassowary Insurance Office and a number of lady clerks are employed there. The salary is not large at first, but it would increase yearly and you would find it come in useful every month. What do you say to being one of them?'

'I should like it very much indeed, Mr Aspinall. How good you are to me.'

'Tut, tut! And now it is getting late

for a little girl to be out alone, especially when she is the owner of fifty pounds.'

'I will see Miss Powis as far as Champion Hill,' put in Robert Aspinall, 'as I am going to Dulwich this evening. But how will she manage about cashing the cheque? The banks are closed now.'

'I fear she must wait till to-morrow,' said Mr Aspinall, while Bertie looked apprehensively at father and son,—she so wanted to take home the money—when some one tapped at the door, and one of the young clerks put his head in.

'I beg your pardon, sir, but I have forgotten to take that money Mr Curtis paid this morning to the bank. Shall I lock it up in the safe?'

'That is very careless of you, Mr Hope. However, bring me here fifty pounds of

it in small notes, and lock up the remainder with this cheque. Endorse it first, my dear.'

'So that difficulty, by a lucky chance, is tided over,' said Mr Robert as Hope left to get the money; 'and I will put the notes in an envelope and take care of them till we get to Champion Hill, so, if you are ready, we will start.'

'Don't run away with him, my dear, he is Miss Eleanor Jameson's property,' chuckled the old gentleman, as he wished her a kind good-bye.

The mention of the name that had been the primary cause of her rupture with John Budd sobered Bertie a little, and as she looked up at the stalwart form walking beside her, met the glance of the kind, blue eyes, and marked how

refined and handsome he was, she decided Robert Aspinall was far too good for Eleanor Jameson, whom, though she had never seen her, she was sure must be detestable.

These thoughts, however, were soon dispelled under his protecting influence, as he carefully piloted her through the crowded streets, and she soon found herself chattering away to him about her daily life and small adventures; how, when she had gone after the situation of a governess, the chief condition being, that she should be the daughter of a gentleman, she had met with such cold haughtiness and rude behaviour, and when the lady wrote to decline her services, she had the meanness and ill-breeding to write on a post card—‘As

if I was not worth a penny stamp.' 'Some so-called ladies are rare snobs,' put in Robert Aspinall contemptuously.

And then she told him how she took to embroidering stockings at one-and-ninepence the dozen pairs; and when he opened his eyes at the magnificent remuneration, she said, that those who employed her were so kind and considerate, that she never minded doing work for them.

Running on like this to an amused and appreciative listener—Robert Aspinall was engaged and an honourable man; but it was a pretty little girl, excited with success, who talked—they arrived at Champion Hill before either thought it possible, and her new acquaintance handed her out, and, giving her the

sealed packet, looked after her with a little sigh, as the train moved on.

Impatient to impart her good news, Bertie flew from the station home, and bursting into the parlour, where they were all anxiously expecting her, threw the packet of notes into her mother's lap, crying—

‘I said I would, and I have. There are fifty pounds, and more's coming.’ And she danced round the room with Nancy, she kissed Alice, hugged the cat, and finally begged her mother to give her a shilling, that she might go and buy something nice for tea—the Powis' way of celebrating any good luck.

‘But explain to me, Bertie, how you got this money and what you have done. Nothing foolish, I hope?’ enquired her anxious mother.

Thus adjured the breathless little body explained to her best ability, how in her extremity she had suddenly thought of her godmother's legacy, hitherto looked on as valueless, and how at the sametime she remembered in what high estimation she had heard her father speak of Mr Aspinall, and she had determined to try and make up for John Budd's defection. And to their surprise she told them how she had ventured into the lawyer's den, had not only succeeded but had been promised a clerkship in 'The Cassowary.'

'You must have a new dress, dear,' said her mother.

'Oh, no; there will not be a shilling too much for our real wants. All I shall want will be a strong pair of boots,' looking down on the shabbily shod little feet,

‘if I go trudging to ‘The Cassowary’ every day.’

But as they sat enjoying the crumpets and marmalade while Bertie alternately divided the fifty pounds and described the Messrs Aspinall to her sisters, her mother broke in pettishly, ‘I hope you have not been making yourself out a regular victim, Bertie. You have no pride.’

Poor Bertie! Her loyal heart resented the unjust imputation, though she was too proud even to disclaim the insinuation.

A silence followed which was broken by Alice observing,

‘I daresay Bertie will marry young Mr Aspinall.’

‘Don’t be so ready, Alice,’ interposed Nancy, ‘I might like him myself, and

Bertie is too good a sister to stand in my light.'

'Don't *you* be so ready, Nancy,' exclaimed Bertie, who still felt too aggrieved to answer so kindly as her wont, though she quite meant what she said. 'I might give up a good deal for you, but a lover is rather too much, and if I were so good a sister as to make the sacrifice you would be very selfish to accept it. You may read of such cases in romances but I doubt if you will ever hear of them in real life, when a girl really cares for her lover.'

'Don't preach, darling. Of course you are right. I know I wouldn't myself. What's young Aspy's name?'

'Robert.'

'Don't care for it.'

'Lovely,' said little Alice.

‘I don’t. So you may have him, Bertie.’

‘We need not quarrel about him. He’s engaged.’

‘Who to?’

‘Eleanor Jameson.’

‘The wretch!’

CHAPTER III

THREE or four days elapsed during which Mrs Powis prophesied that the Aspinalls would forget all about them, and Bertie's heart began to sink, when the following letter arrived :

'THE CASSOWARY FIRE AND LIFE
'INSURANCE OFFICE

'DEAR MADAM,

'We have a vacancy in the Lady Clerks' Department, and our solicitors, Messrs Aspinall & Son, have

recommended you as a suitable person to fill the post. If you will give us a call to-morrow (Tuesday), at three o'clock, to state your qualifications, we will consider whether we can engage you.

‘Yours faithfully,

‘JOHN ROGERS,

‘*Manager.*’

The receipt of this letter caused another small hurricane of excitement in the Powis household, and entailed another small feast in the shape of eggs and muffins.

So Bertie made another expedition to the city, and this time was ushered by a formidable looking porter into a large room and was told to sit on a hard shiney chair opposite a sharp looking gentleman in a comfortable arm-chair, who scrutinised

her so narrowly that she could scarcely answer the questions he so closely put. Turning red and white by turns she sat twisting her small hands as the sharp looking gentleman expressed some doubts whether she would be strong enough for the work. But she assured him with so much earnestness that she was capable of undergoing any fatigue, and her entreating grey eyes pleaded so strongly for her, that, with a man's weakness in such cases, her interrogator broke into a smile and engaged her to come the following Monday.

‘Nine sharp, mind,’ he added, as after informing her of her duties she left the room and he muttered, ‘Too pretty by half.’

The joyful news that Bertie was en-

gaged at the Cassowary at a guinea a week, payable monthly, rendered fried ham indispensable at tea that evening. And on the Monday following, Bertie, in high spirits and with a hopeful heart, entered on her new duties. If they were at times irksome, and if she reached home tired and worn out on dark winter evenings, her bright spirits never flagged, the monthly payments came in so handily. Bruce had left with his five pounds; Nancy gave such a promise of becoming a proficient in music; little Alice had already benefited by the treatment of Dr —, that when Christmas came round and brought with it, not only a well-stocked hamper from Mr Aspinall, but an offer to buy the reversion for another thirty pounds, Mrs Powis was too happy to

complain once and insisted on Bertie having a warm winter wrap.

Then there was the signing of the deeds relating to the sale of the reversion, when Mr Aspinall was as kind and cheerful as before, and Mr Robert was anxious to know if she thought she should get on at The Cassowary, and if her companions were agreeable.

She answered yes to both questions, though she could have told him to the second that the other lady clerks eyed her askance, and she had already been dubbed 'Little Standoff' by them on account of her reserved and self-possessed demeanour.

But with the New Year came more bills than there was money to pay. Alice still wanted nourishment and medicines,

and Nancy would require the fees for another term. The weather set in very severe and Bertie sallied forth one bitter January morning with an anxious heart. She took her usual seat and tried to do her work, but towards the middle of the day an incident occurred which flurried and upset her.

‘What name?’ she heard a fellow clerk say.

‘Budd,’ was the answer in a well-known voice. And looking up Bertie encountered the astonished stare of her quondam lover.

‘Hullo!’ he ejaculated under his breath. And then seeing Bertie smile he went up and asked her how she was.

According to her preconceived determinations she treated him with cheer-

ful politeness, but her attention was more particularly directed towards the lady who accompanied him than to himself. She was tall and striking and she critically surveyed Bertie with a pair of bright dark eyes.

Seeing the two women eye each other, John Budd effected a clumsy sort of introduction and 'Miss Eleanor Jameson' fell on Bertie's ear. She noticed the evident air of proprietorship between the two as they turned away with a few muttered words. A thrill of thankfulness passed through her frame at her escape, which was replaced by a sigh at Robert Aspinall's imperilled happiness as she overheard her next neighbour say to a crony, 'There's no doubt those are two spoony ones. She's got him and she'll have him.'

The temporary annoyance that the unexpected encounter occasioned passed away and her attention was next aroused by hearing 'My, how it snows! However shall we get home?' There had been a slight fall the day before and the skies looked very threatening in the morning, but though she knew that it had been snowing all day, Bertie was unprepared for the scene that met her view when she left the office that evening. Carriage traffic was nearly suspended, the snow had drifted into huge mounds on one side of the street and locomotion was difficult and perilous. Bertie had until this evening been rather pleased that none of her fellow-workers went the same way as herself, she did not care to make intimates of any of them. To-night she

felt sorry to part with a group of them at the corner of the street, and envied them as she heard their merry laughter as with difficulty they preserved their equilibrium.

Proceeding carefully along and nearly frozen by the keen wind, after many a slip and a few falls, Bertie at last reached London Bridge hoping her troubles were nearly over. Arrived on the platform she noticed that though there were trains in the station there appeared no preparations for starting them; the porters stood talking to knots of people, and all the ticket offices were closed.

She went into the waiting-room and warmed herself by the fire until she saw the hands of the clock pass the time her train was timed to start. She went out

and asked an official if 'there was anything the matter.'

'Matter, miss? So much the matter that not a train 'll move out o' here to-night; the snow's been and blocked the line.'

Bertie was mute with despair. She was alone in the huge city on a bitter winter's night without a friend or a refuge. If the trains could not proceed on their way no other conveyance could be got to take her home, for the few cabs there were about had two horses driven tandem fashion, were going at a snail's pace and were charging exorbitant fares. And Bertie had only about two shillings in her pocket and there was not much more at home, and to walk there alone, even if she had known the way, was im-

possible that weather. She was hungry and tired, and though she might be able to get a modest tea, yet where could she get a decent bed? The hotels were crowded by men unable to get to their suburban homes, and were far too expensive for her, and she knew enough of the world to be aware that it would be a dangerous thing for a young and attractive woman to go to any cheap house of entertainment, even if they would take her in.

So as her forlorn state broke in upon her the brave heart gave way and she burst into tears.

People were so cold and there were so many cases of misery that ever memorable January night that no one stopped to ask the cause of her distress, and turning

sorrowfully into the street, for the railway authorities were about to turn off the gas and close the station, she encountered a gentleman who nearly tripped and more nearly knocked her over.

‘I beg your pardon,’ he said at first and then ‘Why, it’s Miss Powis! Whatever are you doing here?’

‘Oh, Mr Aspinall, I don’t know what to do. The trains are not running and how can I get home, and they will be so frightened.’ She was too agitated to be very lucid.

‘Well, crying won’t mend it, will it?’ said Robert Aspinall. ‘I am in the same plight as yourself. I cannot get to Norwood where we live, so we must concoct some plan how we can get shelter for the night.’

She thought how easy it would be for him, a man and with plenty of money in his pocket, but she shook her head dolefully as she said, 'her mother would be so frightened if she did not get home.'

'At anyrate,' he said, 'they won't be frightened if you are a little late, as they will know you will have a difficulty in getting back, so come and dine with me at the —, and then perhaps we may find some means of getting home when we have fortified the inner man. You won't mind trusting yourself to me, and I will see you safe and sound to Champion Hill.'

Mind! she never dared to think much of Robert Aspinall, but her heart leapt at his kind proposal, and she hardly heeded the discomfort and annoyance she

had been put to when she was seated in the warm and brilliantly lighted room at the —, and in due time partook of a repast that put the home teas to shame. And as he took care of her, talked to her, and smiled indulgently upon her with the freedom his dozen years of seniority gave him, she grudged Eleanor Jameson the possession of him, and marvelled how she could flirt with a short, squat, commonplace man like John Budd, when she was in the habit of associating with so splendid and clever a being as Robert Aspinall.

And he enjoyed the dinner as much as Bertie did. To him, indeed, some of the courses were cold and ill-cooked, and the wine flat and poor. But the tender, bright little being who sat opposite to him was

so amusing and chatty, her heart so full of affectionate thought, her courage so high and undaunted, that the very breakdown of her spirit that evening only proved she possessed a woman's gentleness; and her pretty apologies were met by the assurance that, so far as he was concerned, he was glad of the mischance, as it had given him a very pleasant evening.

And Robert Aspinall meant what he said.

He was desirous that she should be accommodated at some respectable hotel for the night, but after going to one or two houses and finding them full, and seeing her earnest wish to reach home that night, he set about seeking some conveyance.

With much trouble, and only by offering

an exorbitant sum, he prevailed on a cabman to take them to Champion Hill. It was past ten o'clock when they started on their way, and the horses toiled painfully along.

It was bitterly cold, so, perhaps, that was the reason why Robert Aspinall drew her so near to him and chafed her little hands paternally.

For pleasant as it was to cheer and comfort this pretty, trembling girl, Robert Aspinall was not the man to frighten her or take advantage of her position.

They had got to Camberwell, and it was just on twelve o'clock when the cabman, perhaps attracted by the light and jollity of a public-house, got down and absolutely refused to proceed any further. Remonstrance was useless. The man was

determined, said the horses were dead beat, and the roads impassable; and so the two had to get out and finish their journey on foot. It was not more than a mile, but what with the snow and the darkness it was past two o'clock when they at last reached Bertie's home.

As Robert Aspinall half carried, half supported his exhausted charge up the pathway, the street door opened, and the whole family welcomed and drew them into the light and warmth.

'You must give me a shake-down to-night, Mrs Powis,' said Robert Aspinall. 'I can go no further.'

'Yes, you are welcome to all we have. How can I ever thank you, Mr Aspinall?' said the grateful mother in the relief of vanished anxiety.

So the mother and daughters packed away together in a wonderful way, that Robert Aspinall might be properly accommodated, and talked over the day's adventures till they dropped asleep from sheer fatigue.

Next morning, Nancy gravely observed at breakfast, 'I dreamt of a funeral last night, so look out for a wedding.'

And Robert Aspinall laughed, and, asking Bertie when she would be ready, safely escorted her to the doors of 'The Cassowary' office.

CHAPTER IV

THERE was much whispering and smothered laughter in 'The Cassowary Fire and Life Insurance Office' the morning after that 'Terrible Tuesday' amongst the lady clerks, as they recounted the various adventures they had met with going home the previous night. Bertie had determined not to add to the stock of experiences; she knew from daily contact with them that the story would meet with unlimited chaff

and suggestions, and she would not for the world have let it be known that Robert Aspinall had been her companion, and had his name coupled with hers; she held him in too great respect. So she kept quiet, merely saying in answer to enquiries that it was late before she got home, trusting that they would leave her, as they generally did, to herself, but one of the most,] flippant among them took up her remark. 'Late, and no wonder! when we have a handsome swell to take us to dine at the —— and to run about seeing after carriages. Ah! little Miss Standoff, I saw you! For I know one of the lady clerks there, and I stayed with her during the evening and spied you come in. And didn't you toss off the champagne and wasn't he spoony?

Who is he? Mind you send us some wedding cake.'

Bertie coloured up, but she answered smilingly, 'It is no question of wedding cake, Miss Walker—at least, not for me. The gentleman I was with is engaged to another lady, but he is an old friend, and finding me alone in the city gave me some dinner before taking me home.'

'At anyrate, he brought you to the office this morning,' was the loud retort.

'Will you please obey the office regulation of silence, Miss Walker,' broke in the voice of the superintendent of the department, who had come behind them unobserved.

The culprit bent her head over her writing to hide a grin, but Bertie's cheek reddened as the superior eyed her coldly.

Though silenced for the moment, Minnie Walker did not forget to spread the story of 'Little Standoff's' flirtation about the office, and with each repetition there was an exaggeration, so that, at last, it not only reached the male clerks, who ran up against her in the passages, and stared impudently at her; but it came to the ears of the superintendent—a starched old maid—who considered it her duty to report it to the manager.

The behaviour of the lady clerks was expected to be very strict, and a whisper of impropriety against any of them was strictly investigated, and, unless the offender could clear herself, she was discharged.

Noticing, as she did, the conduct of those around her, Bertie was much dis-

turbed, but hardly surprised, when about a week after she was summoned into the board-room, where were seated the manager, the secretary, and one of the directors—the lady superintendent standing by—to answer a charge of putting herself under the care of some strange gentleman on the previous Tuesday, and remaining out all night with him at the — hotel.

To this accusation she gave an indignant denial. She explained that owing to the inclement weather the trains had stopped running, and she had met an old and valued friend of her father's who, after giving her some dinner, had with great difficulty taken her home, and as it was impossible for him to reach his own house at Norwood that night her mother had

given him a bed, and she had come up to town with him next morning.

‘Then,’ said the manager, ‘if you will tell us the name of the gentleman so that we may write to him, we have no doubt that he will send us in reply a corroboration of your story,’ and he dipped a pen in the ink as he awaited her answer.

But to give up Robert Aspinall’s name might involve him in unpleasant consequences as an engaged man, and to increase her fears on this point she had seen Eleanor Jameson at the office, and she knew how unexpectedly things leaked out. And to have him know her conduct had been subjected to investigation and he to have been the innocent cause of it, made her cheek tingle with shame. And she remained silent.

‘Come, come, Miss Powis,’ said the manager impatiently, ‘give me the name and address.’

‘Speak, my dear,’ whispered the lady superintendent, touched by the girl’s distress, ‘remember how important this is to you, for you may lose your place.’

But to speak would be treachery to Robert Aspinall, — and treachery was foreign to Bertie Powis’ large heart. She might be headstrong, flippant, and even ready, if it only affected herself, to lower herself as she had done to John Budd. But to benefit herself at another’s expense was quite another thing. Was her brave fight against difficulties and ingratitude to result in the betrayal of one of her kindest friends, who the first time he had seen her had helped her so generously, and

who when she had been left friendless and cold in the London streets had assisted her so unselfishly and had inconvenienced himself for her comfort? A thousand times No! Hard as it would be to lose her situation and with a stain on her character, it would be preferable to such a paltry escape from her dilemma.

So she respectfully replied that she was not at liberty to divulge the name of her friend.

‘Would you ask his permission to do so if we gave you till Thursday morning,’ said the Director, compassionating the pretty flushed face.

‘I could not ask him, sir,’ she said.

‘Then, Miss Powis, we shall not require your services after Saturday,’ ob-
the manager.

And Bertie got out of the room somehow and gained her desk, where she sat with burning hands and dazed eyes only realising that matters now were at their darkest.

For that morning another long bill had come in. Bruce had written for more money and Jane had given notice to leave, and Mrs Powis had said they must try to do without the expense of a servant. That she thought had meant an hour's earlier getting up in the morning for her, and late work after her return home from the office. And now, she sorrowfully reflected, she would be at home all day and with no money coming in.

But she did not regret her decision, nor would she have recalled it for any consideration.

She was recalled from her reflections by being reminded by the superintendent that while she remained in the office she must not neglect her duties. So she worked on till evening, and once when the door opened she saw Robert Aspinall pass, as he left the boardroom with a stern pale face, and she feared he might have been told without further explanation that she had been dismissed for light conduct. But

‘Be the day dreary or ever so long,
At length it ringeth to evensong.’

And it was time to go home. As Bertie was leaving someone touched her.

‘I am very sorry, Miss Powis, dear. I am afraid my unlucky tongue has got you into trouble,’ said Minnie Walker.

‘Never mind, dear, you did not mean it.’

And Bertie, always generous and forgiving, gave the girl a kind kiss, and received a hearty hug in return.

She did not tell them when she got home of the new misfortune. It was Nancy’s birthday, and Bertie would not dim the festive tea by a recital of her troubles. And she was talking merrily with dangerously bright eyes when a ring came at the door, and Nancy, flying to open it, admitted Robert Aspinall, and brought him right into the midst of them.

‘You should have shown Mr Aspinall into the drawing-room, Nancy,’ reproved her mother. (Fortunately there was a fire there that night).

‘Oh! don’t scold her, Mrs Powis,’ interposed the visitor, ‘I am much obliged to her for bringing me in here. I am awfully hungry, and want some of that nice cake, and several cups of tea.’

And, to his entertainer’s delight, he did make a hearty meal, for hospitality was an article of faith with the Powises.

Robert Aspinall did not talk much to Bertie (who had become very silent, and had lost her appetite), but he glanced very often at her, and made himself very much at home, so that Nancy made him cognisant of all their domestic affairs.

‘And so we shall have to do everything for ourselves,’ Bertie to her horror heard her sister say. ‘And I should not mind nearly so much if it were not for blacking grates and taking in the milk and cat’s’—

‘Nancy!’ ejaculated Mrs Powis sepulchrally.

‘The cat’s butcher,’ mildly suggested Alice.

‘Ah! yes,’ said Robert Aspinall with infinite tact, ‘pussy must be fed, especially such a fine cat. I like cats.’

‘So do I,’ said little Alice, ‘he is my cat.’

‘Then I like him all the more. And now Miss Bertie, let me have a little talk with you.’

She was dreadfully frightened, but led the way into the drawing-room, and Robert Aspinall shut the door and drew her on to the hearthrug. Then taking her hands in his and looking down on her from his superior height he said, with a quizzical look in his blue eyes.

‘And why did you not make a clean breast of it at “The Cassowary” to-day, you little goose?’

She glanced up at him and then looked down at the two pairs of clasped hands and hung her head, a foolish little thing!

‘Do you think I am so formidable as those—to put it mildly—those donkeys in London?’ and he tried to peer into her eyes.

‘Oh! Mr Aspinall! I could not be so ungrateful as to drag your name in. I knew you were engaged ——,’ she stopped fearing she had taken a liberty.

‘I am not engaged, Bertie,’ he said very quietly.

She could not help feeling glad, though how could it matter to her! And was it not wicked to be glad when Mr Aspinall

must be sorry! But he did not look so. Perhaps he read her thoughts, for he continued—

‘Miss Eleanor Jameson has jilted me for Mr John Budd,’ and he gave a knowing look at Bertie’s conscious face.

‘Then she must be very silly,’ was her indignant comment.

‘You don’t look down on me and despise me as a rejected lover,’ he said.

Look down on, and despise him. Absurd!

‘And what about John Budd?’ he enquired.

And she told him all about that episode of her life to which he listened attentively, and then Bertie feeling awkward, observed, ‘I am sorry to leave “The Cassowary.”’

‘Never mind,’ he said consolingly, ‘I have got another engagement for you.’

‘How good of you,’ she exclaimed.

‘It will be good of *you* if you accept my offer. Bertie I want you to be engaged to me.’ And he took her in his arms and kissed her, and Bertie rested her head in perfect trust on that loving heart.

And so after all the dark days of hardship and privation there dawned a bright future for Bertie Powis. In her wildest dreams (and she had had as many as other girls) she had never imagined such a happy fate as to be Robert Aspinall’s wife.

Mrs Powis was made contented by a moderate income. It was intimated to Bruce and Jack they must not worry

her for money. Alice grew strong, and Nancy became a skilled musician, as she had always promised.

And this was all through Bertie.

She had Minnie Walker to spend the evening once, and if Minnie had been instrumental in spreading an injurious report about her once, she did her best to repair the mischief by stating publicly in the office that it was Mr Aspinall who had had charge of Bertie that 'terrible Tuesday,' and she was always 'as good as gold' and 'a dear little thing.'

'Who do you think I walked behind to-day?' asked Robert Aspinall when he got home one evening as he took his little wife on his knee.

'Mr and Mrs John Budd,' hazarded Bertie.

‘What a witch to guess! They were quarrelling.’

‘How mean to listen.’

‘Who said I listened? But I won’t punish you by not satisfying your curiosity. She said but for him she might have married me.’

‘And he’——

‘Said, that but for her he might have married you.’



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